
REPORT

A POSITIVE CHOICE: YOUNG PEOPLE WHO DRINK LITTLE OR NO ALCOHOL

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This study examined the lives and choices of young people (aged 16–25) living in the UK who drink little or no alcohol.

Current policy is directed at young people who drink alcohol with little attention paid to the insights of those who drink lightly or not at all. The influences that shape young people's decisions and how their choices and patterns of consumption affect their lives were explored through interviews.

The report:

- examines current drinking patterns and identifies five 'drinking types';
- highlights that choosing not to drink alcohol or to drink lightly is a commonplace and positive choice;
- explores the influences and experiences that led young people to their choices and identifies three 'narratives' encapsulating their journeys;
- considers the strategies and responses young people employ to manage not drinking or drinking lightly; and
- critically examines the widely held assumption that drinking is part of 'growing up' and discusses how 'not drinking' could be supported as a valid choice.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Young people's drinking is a matter of social, media and political concern and the focus of much policy activity. Despite a policy focus on drinking, a fifth of young people aged 16–24 years do not drink alcohol and 11 per cent drink under one unit a week (NHS Information Centre for Health and Social Care, 2012) however, knowledge and understanding of their choices and how they manage not drinking is limited. Nor has much consideration been given to the possibility that the insights of young non- and light drinkers could be useful in thinking about how to change the prevailing drinking culture.

Aims and methods

This was an exploratory, qualitative study using in-depth interviews with young people aged 16–25 who drink little or no alcohol. It aimed to explore the influences that shape their decisions and how their choices and patterns of consumption affect their lives in order to further understanding their lives and identify ways to support their choices.

Young people's current attitudes and behaviours

The researchers interviewed 52 young people (26 women and 26 men). The sample consisted of 22 people who currently do not drink alcohol (nine women and 13 men) and 30 current light drinkers (17 women and 13 men) who reported drinking small amounts infrequently. Experimenting with cigarettes or drugs was rare. The majority of young people did not see drinking alcohol as a bad thing and were not anti-alcohol. Most young people stressed that they see drinking as a personal and not a moral choice. The prevailing view was that drinking in moderation is okay, but that it is important for people to know their limits.

Five drinking types were identified from the data, which encapsulate young people's drinking habits in terms of both their current and previous use (see Table 1). For many young people their current drinking (or non-drinking) represents a shift over time, with some having drunk more in the past.

Table 1: Drinking types

Drinking type	Young women	Young men	Total
Former drinker no longer drinks	5	4	9
Non drinker	4	9	13
Light drinker but used to drink heavily	1	4	5
Light drinker with past episodic drunkenness	11	3	14
Light drinker who has never been drunk	5	6	11
Total	26	26	52

Choosing to drink little or no alcohol

This study found that choosing not to drink or drink lightly is a positive choice that young people make for varied reasons. The strongest messages and influences come from real life observations. They include good parental models, but, for some, may involve seeing: the often negative or harmful effects of alcohol on others, including friends and family; not liking the taste of alcohol; the high cost; drinking not fitting in with their other commitments (e.g. sporting, academic); and, for some, their own negative past experiences with drinking, for example after getting drunk. For some young people the decision not to drink is central to their identity, for others it is 'no big deal', just one of many life choices.

Becoming a non- or light drinker

In order to understand how young people arrived at their current drinking attitudes and behaviours it is necessary to consider the range of influences and experiences they described, particularly as they were growing up. These were captured in young people's narratives, the stories and recollections that they related during interviews to help explain their current attitudes and behaviours. From the data three narratives could be identified which capture these journeys:

- **'Consistent'** – young people fitting this narrative have been consistent in the decisions they have made regarding alcohol use over their lifespan. Although in these cases there are again many influences that help to explain why young people do not drink or drink lightly, these influences often seem to reinforce existing attitudes and beliefs about drinking. Young people who have been consistent in their views about alcohol are non-drinkers and light drinkers who have never been drunk.
- **'Transitional'** – these narratives tend to involve shifts and fluctuations in drinking over time eventually leading to a reduction in consumption. It is difficult to pinpoint a specific experience or belief about alcohol that explains changes in drinking, or a particular moment in time when change occurred. A large number of these young people formed their decisions in part through their personal experiences of drinking. Fluctuations in how these young people drink are still sometimes evident and they may still occasionally get drunk or have more to drink than they planned.

- **‘Turning point’** – young people fitting these narratives have experienced a turning point during their life that leads to a change in behaviour and/or a change in attitude towards alcohol. This was frequently observed in young people who were former heavy drinkers, or had a particularly negative experience with alcohol that put them off drinking. It was also noticeable, however, for two young people who had always been non-drinkers, who made a conscious decision to not drink at a young age. Turning points commonly involved religion, health or a drunken experience.

A total of 16 young people described a narrative featuring a turning point, 17 reported transitional narratives, and 19 revealed consistent decisions and attitudes towards alcohol over their lifetimes.

Being a non or light drinker

These young people live busy and varied lives. Most are in full-time study, often combining this with either paid or voluntary work. They engage in a range of leisure interests (e.g. playing sport, photography, dancing) and enjoy doing the ‘usual things’ (i.e. spending time with friends, watching films). Their lives often reflect involvement in activities where alcohol rarely plays a role.

Although some young people avoid drinking environments, many are content to socialise with those who drink. Young people develop their own responses and strategies for managing not drinking within drinking situations. These include a firm but polite ‘no thank you’ to offers of drinks, mirroring drinks so that people think they are drinking alcohol, buying their own drinks, disposing of unwanted drinks or having a legitimate excuse such as driving. Light drinkers report nursing their drinks to make them last longer, avoid buying in rounds and going only for a short time to events where the focus is on drinking (i.e. arriving late or leaving early). The approach taken depends on the context (e.g. whether with old friends, in a new social situation etc.), and also reflects the extent to which young people are open about their drinking behaviour. This varies considerably with some being ‘up front’ about their drinking preferences while others strive to blend in and not reveal what they are drinking.

“But no one told me it’s okay not to drink...”

Young people felt there was a widespread assumption that drinking heavily was part of growing up, and which they came across among parents/family, friends, peers, in schools and within the media. Messages about alcohol from school, education and the media were felt by some young people to reinforce stereotypes and norms around drinking behaviour. Young people were angered by the lack of support for their choice and wanted their personal preferences to be respected and recognised as being valid. Young people thought that health messages place too strong an emphasis on the longer-term health effects of alcohol use; for them the immediate impacts of drinking were of greater concern such as having a hangover or not being able to study or work effectively.

Young people challenged and were critical of what they saw as distorted and negative portrayals of young people as heavy binge drinkers in the media. There is a need to redress the current imbalance in these media portrayals and also to widen the drinking discourse beyond misuse and drunkenness and its effects.

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings of this study reflect that it is commonplace for young people to choose not to drink or drink lightly. Choosing to drink little or no alcohol is a positive choice made for diverse reasons, with the major influences coming from observing people around them. Good parental role models play a part as does witnessing the negative effects of alcohol among people in the wider community. Young people develop responses and strategies to help them manage not drinking alcohol and many are content to socialise with those who drink.

There is currently a widespread assumption that drinking alcohol is an integral part of growing up for young people, reinforced by alcohol education messages given in schools and by health educators, by media portrayals and by some parents. Alcohol education and advice aimed at young people and at their parents should present the option of not drinking as a valid choice. Choosing to drink little or not alcohol needs to be highlighted as commonplace and information on strategies used successfully by young people who do not drink or drink lightly needs to be available.

There should be more opportunities for young people to socialise without alcohol or where it is not the focus of the event, for example in events promoted by further and higher education institutions. Such steps would help to support individuals who choose not to drink and foster a culture where heavy drinking is not seen as essential to a good night out. For such changes to be effective they would need to be replicated more widely and be part of broader efforts to shift social and cultural attitudes and perceptions more generally.

1 INTRODUCTION

Young people's drinking is a matter of social, media and political concern and the focus of much policy activity within the United Kingdom (UK). However, little consideration has been given to the fact that some young people choose to drink little or not at all, and our knowledge and understanding of their choices and how they manage not drinking is limited. Nor has much attention been paid to the possibility that the insights of young light and non-drinkers could be useful when thinking about how to change the prevailing drinking culture, but if we are to gauge and engage with the current culture of consumption then we need to understand all parts of it (Pattenden *et al.*, 2008).

This study was about furthering understanding of the lives and choices of young people who drink little or no alcohol, learning from them and identifying ways to support their choices. The key policy concern is that drinking to get drunk has become the predominant drinking culture among young people. This pattern of drinking heavily over a short period is often referred to as binge drinking¹ and is associated with a range of harms to individuals (e.g. accidents, ill-health) and also to the wider community (e.g. crime and disorder). The focus of research has been on documenting and understanding the predominant drinking culture (e.g. Measham, 2006; Coleman and Cater, 2007; Szmigin *et al.*, 2008). Measham (2006) has described this type of heavy, sessional drinking as 'determined drunkenness', which recognises underlying motivations in drinking patterns. Research has highlighted that, for most young people, drinking and getting drunk is primarily about pleasure – having fun, going out with friends and taking time out of everyday life – and harm is rarely considered as an outcome (indeed some harms are viewed as part of the experience) (Harnett *et al.*, 2000; Sheehan and Ridge, 2001; Maycock, 2004; Measham, 2006; Szmigin *et al.*, 2008). The term 'bounded hedonism' describes the style of

drinking that young people use to manage their drinking, such as slowing down their consumption and switching to soft drinks (Szmigin *et al.*, 2008). Recent qualitative research on teenage drinking (Percy *et al.*, 2011) found that teenagers develop drinking 'expertise', learning to manage their level of intoxication using a number of strategies and that there is considerable stigma associated with getting too drunk. Less attention has been paid to the possibility that there is more to young people's drinking than binge drinking. Evidence from qualitative studies suggests that young people's drinking is much more nuanced: it depends on context and drinking patterns and reflects family background, life stage, previous experiences with alcohol and socioeconomic circumstances (Harnett *et al.*, 2000; Piacentini and Banister, 2006; Bradby, 2007; Mullen *et al.*, 2007). Recent research has highlighted the dynamic nature of drinking during the teenage years and young adulthood, the strong association between age and drinking style and the significant changes in drinking style that happen in relatively short periods of time as young people take on the responsibilities of adulthood (Seaman and Ikegwuonu, 2010; Percy *et al.*, 2011). For the young adults (aged 18–25) in Seaman and Ikegwuonu's (2010) study, their current style of drinking to excess with their friends was seen as a temporary phase associated with life stage and they envisaged drinking more moderately in the future.

We know from survey data that a sizeable minority of young people abstain from drinking or drink lightly: in Great Britain in 2010, 20 per cent of men and 22 per cent of women aged 16–24 were non-drinkers, while 11 per cent of this age group (men and women) drank under one unit a week (NHS Information Centre for Health and Social Care, 2012). Analysis of Health Survey for England data obtained from white adults (aged 18–55) between 1994 and 2003 found that 'never drinkers' were a significant minority in England and the proportion of 'never drinkers' rose during this period, with a small rise in the younger group (aged 18–29) (Pattenden *et al.*, 2008). Other survey data shows an upward trend since 2003 in the number of teenagers in England choosing not to drink alcohol: in 2003, 39 per cent of pupils aged 11–15 had never had a drink; by 2009 the figure was 49 per cent and in 2010 it had risen to 56 per cent (Fuller, 2011). Conversely, the number of pupils aged 11–15 who reported drinking in the last week had fallen: in 2001, 26 per cent of pupils reported drinking in the last week; by 2009 the figure was 18 per cent and in 2010 it had fallen to 13 per cent (Fuller, 2011). It has been hypothesised that increasing numbers of young people are eschewing consumerism and behaviour that is potentially damaging to health or the environment; moreover, these 'New Puritans' support measures to curb other peoples' behaviour (Future Foundation, 2008).

Reasons for not drinking include sporting ambitions, religious and/or cultural prohibitions, family history of alcohol misuse or simply not liking the effects of alcohol (Nairn *et al.*, 2006; Bradby, 2007; Piacentini and Banister, 2009). Low alcohol consumption and abstinence have been found to vary according to gender, ethnicity and religion. Black and Asian young people in the UK are less likely to drink and more likely to abstain than white British young people (Denscombe and Drucquer, 2000; Best *et al.*, 2001). This difference is more pronounced for young females who are more likely to abstain than males across all ethnic groups, although research suggests that the gender gap may be closing for young people from some ethnicities (Hurcombe *et al.*, 2010). A recent study found that girls from white and black ethnicities were significantly more likely to have consumed alcohol than their male counterparts (Goodman *et al.*, 2011).

Drinking cultures among young people are also found to differ between rural and urban environments for historical, cultural and socioeconomic

reasons (Valentine *et al.*, 2007). Valentine *et al.* (2007) contrast the more visibly restrained drinking patterns and lower tolerance thresholds of people in a rural area with heavier urban drinking profiles. However, the ethnic diversity of urban populations is also more likely to include those who do not drink on religious grounds, particularly those of Muslim faith. Not drinking may have important consequences, in particular increasing social segregation. Valentine *et al.* (2007) found that non-drinking Muslims avoided public alcohol-related leisure venues and events frequented by white people.

Research has found that non-drinkers often have to justify their behaviour among drinking peers (Nairn *et al.*, 2006; Piacentini and Banister, 2009; Seaman and Ikegwuonu, 2010), while others would pass themselves off as drinkers and blend into the crowd (Nairn *et al.*, 2006). How young people negotiate not drinking, particularly in drinking situations, is an important area for research, the results of which could assist in the development of interventions to shift current norms around drinking. In Piacentini and Banister's (2009) study, students identified themselves as 'anti-consumers' and as 'not drinking alcohol'. While some did not consume any alcohol, others drank lightly or occasionally, but they all perceived themselves as operating outside the norms of consumption. The non-drinkers in Seaman and Ikegwuonu's (2010) study appeared to gain a sense of pride from their resistance to cultural and group norms and also displayed a high degree of individuality. This raises questions about perceptions of norms, of identity and feelings of being 'other'.

Drinking among young people is primarily a sociable leisure activity and alcohol appears to play a significant and symbolic role in how it shapes social relations and social identity (Roche *et al.*, 2008; Seaman and Ikegwuonu, 2010). Seaman and Ikegwuonu (2010) found that the four non-drinkers within their study of drinking (31 drinkers) did not attempt to separate themselves from their drinking peers and explained how they had developed strategies to manage being non-drinkers in social situations where drinking was the norm, for example claiming to be on medication or casting themselves as designated driver. However, recent research has shown that adolescents as young as 14 and 15 years old who do not drink indicate a preference for friendships with other non-drinkers, and may try to influence their drinking peers to consume less (Goodman *et al.*, 2011). How then do young non-drinkers negotiate their friendships and social identities within a youth culture where drinking is the social norm? What are the effects of non- or light drinking on identity construction, peer group membership and family and wider social networks such as work environments? How might young people be encouraged to adopt social identities that do not embrace excessive consumption? These are all questions that this study set out to explore.

Aims

Within a sample of young women and men (aged 16–25) who drink lightly or not at all, the aims of the study were to explore:

- their perceptions and reasons for not drinking;
- how they experience and negotiate not drinking within the context of a drinking culture;
- how not drinking impacts on social identity formation, social relationships and lifestyle.

More broadly, the study sought to explore non-drinking cultures and the effects of family and peers on drinking patterns. Also taken into consideration

was how working, studying in further education and leisure time may influence, or be influenced by, young people's drinking choices.

Methods

Participants aged 16–25 years were recruited using a variety of approaches: notices on websites, global emails, posters, word of mouth, personal contacts, groups and events (e.g. student events, youth projects). Potential participants completed a brief screening questionnaire and those who drank more than the recommended levels, or gave religion as their primary reason for not drinking,² were excluded from the study as it was important to look beyond religious faith and explore more fully the different reasons why young people chose not to drink or drink little alcohol.

A semi-structured interview schedule, role-play scenarios, comments and timelines were used to elicit information about the respondent's drinking within the context of their lives more broadly (i.e. leisure activities, friendships, family, relationships, work and study, past drinking behaviour and experiences) and also to explore the impact (if any) on their lives of their decision to drink lightly or not at all. The vast majority (35 out of 52) of the interviews were carried out one to one, six pairs of respondents were interviewed and one small focus group was conducted.

In addition, four focus groups were carried out with drinkers to explore their drinking, and their perceptions of light and non-drinkers. While this data proved valuable in furthering our understanding, for example we were able to explore emerging themes from the light and non-drinkers' interviews, the focus of this report is on the light and non-drinkers.

Analysis

The data was collected and analysed by the authors. Verbatim transcripts were coded and key themes identified. The NVivo8 software package was used to assist in data management and analysis of interview data.

Sample: a brief description

Research participants comprised a diverse group of 52 young people (26 women and 26 men) aged between 16 and 25 years who drank little or no alcohol. All the respondents except for four were living in London at the time of the interview. The majority (46) were students, studying at schools (sixth form), further education colleges or universities, with many of them working part time and some had previous experience of full-time employment prior to their current studies. They were studying a wide range of subjects, including sports science, politics, science, healthcare and visual arts, some at degree level, while others were studying for BTEC³ National Diplomas or 'A' levels. Four respondents were in full-time employment and two were unemployed. London is ethnically diverse, with 32 per cent of the population being black, Asian and minority ethnic in 2006 (GLA, 2010) and this is reflected in our sample (see Table 2 for a summary). In order to protect the anonymity of respondents (there were several respondents who were the only respondent of a particular ethnicity) some reclassification into 'other' category has been undertaken.

Respondents came from a broad range of backgrounds and when asked what social class they felt they belonged to, 21 described themselves as

Table 2: Ethnicity of respondents

Ethnicity	Number of respondents
White British	20
Black British	4
Black African	7
Indian	3
Chinese	3
Turkish	3
Other ^a	12
Total number of respondents	52

Note: ^a Includes young people from Eastern European countries and mixed ethnicities.

'working class', 22 as 'middle class', four as 'upper-middle class' and five gave no classification. Almost half the respondents (22) reported that they did not have any particular religious beliefs; the remainder were mostly Christian (six were Catholic, three Church of England and 11 other Christian), five were Muslim (of whom two were non-practising), two were Hindu and three followed other religions.

Four single-sex focus groups were conducted with drinkers: one male and one female group with younger adults aged 16–21 and one male and one female group with slightly older adults aged 22–25. Twenty-five drinkers were included in the four focus groups.

Structure of the report

Chapter 2 – Becoming a non- or light drinker – sets out young people's current drinking patterns and attitudes before considering what we call young people's 'narratives': the stories and recollections that they related during interviews to help explain their current attitudes and behaviours and reported changes (or non-changes) over time in decision-making regarding alcohol use. Three narratives are identifiable that encapsulate the journeys made by young people to arrive at their current drinking patterns and attitudes.

Chapter 3 – Being a non- or light drinker – considers how young people are in the 'here and now' in relation to their drinking behaviour and how they negotiate being a light or non-drinker. It looks at their responses to the perceptions and misperceptions often associated with non- or light drinking and also explores their social lives more broadly.

Chapter 4 considers the conclusions and policy implications.

2 BECOMING A NON-OR LIGHT DRINKER

Much has been made of the influences and pressures on young people to drink alcohol and participate in drinking cultures. Less consideration has been given to the influences and experiences that lead to young people choosing to abstain from drinking, or opting to drink only lightly.

This chapter begins by describing young people's current drinking attitudes and behaviours, looking at how they perceive their own drinking or non-drinking. This is followed by examples of what we call young people's 'narratives': reported changes (or non-changes) over time in their decision-making regarding alcohol use. These narratives highlight young people's exposure to alcohol during their childhood and teenage years, in terms of the drinking of people around them; their own drinking; and messages they received from other sources such as school and the media. How young people interpreted these experiences and influences, and the ways in which they helped to shape their attitudes towards alcohol are explored. Individual experiences and influences often reflected broader themes and consensus across the sample and these themes are discussed to reveal collective reasons why these young people drink little or no alcohol.

Young people's current drinking patterns and attitudes

The sample consisted of 22 people who currently do not drink alcohol (nine young women and 13 young men) and 30 current light drinkers (17 young women and 13 young men). Following analysis of the interview data, five drinking types were identified for young people (see Table 3). The drinking types encapsulate young people's drinking habits in terms of both their current and their previous use. There were 13 young people who had never drunk a whole alcoholic drink, although most had tried sips of drinks. These were categorised as non-drinkers, although it should be noted that this does not equate with being teetotal. For many young people, their current drinking (or non-drinking) represents a shift over time, with some having drunk more

Table 3: Drinking types

Drinking type	Young women	Young men	Total
Former drinker, no longer drinks	5	4	9
Non-drinker	4	9	13
Light drinker but used to drink heavily	1	4	5
Light drinker with past episodic drunkenness	11	3	14
Light drinker who has never been drunk	5	6	11
Total	26	26	52

in the past: of the 22 non-drinkers, nine used to be drinkers and five of the light drinkers had been heavy drinkers. Although 11 of the light drinkers had never been drunk, 14 of the light drinkers had had at least one episode of drunkenness in the past.

With regard to their current drinking, young people during the interviews reported either not drinking at all or drinking small amounts infrequently:

'No I don't touch it at all, at all, I don't drink anything.'

Young woman – former drinker

'We're in March now so it must have been January when it was someone's leavers do. Before that it would have been September when we went on holiday, that's gaps ... New Year's I had one drink.'

Young woman – light drinker

For some, drinking was closely linked to special occasions such as birthdays or Christmas:

'Occasional probably is the best word for it. Like I say I don't know why but it tends to be big events like birthdays and you have a glass of wine at Christmas, on Christmas Day with your big roast dinner and everything and maybe like my 18th birthday, because it was a big one, I had a glass of champagne and a glass of wine and stuff like that and it was nice. But I just can't stand to drink for no reason; it just seems a pointless waste of time to me.'

Young man – light drinker

The majority of young people in the sample did not see drinking alcohol as a bad thing per se and were not anti-alcohol. Most young people stressed that they see drinking alcohol as a personal and not a moral choice. Several of the non-drinkers considered that although they believed that alcohol is not right for them, it does not follow that alcohol is not right for others. It was recognised that it may be a moral choice for people who do not drink because it is proscribed by their religion, but aside from religious grounds choosing to drink or not was not deemed a moral matter.

The prevailing view was that drinking in moderation is okay, but that it is important for people to know their limits. Participants emphasised that drinking needs to be 'responsible' and 'reasonable'. Young people varied in their definitions of responsible and reasonable, with some young people thinking that alcohol is appropriate only for special occasions a few times a year, and others arguing that drinking is okay as long as people are not doing themselves any harm.

The need for people to recognise their limits when drinking was sometimes expressed in terms of behavioural limits, such as not acting very drunk and losing control, and at other times it was referred to as consumption over longer

periods of time and the need to avoid what they loosely termed 'addiction' and denoting some form of dependency. Both of these were pertinent for young people, though non-drinkers were more likely to emphasise the need to limit consumption to avoid health risks. Drinking just for the sake of drinking was often criticised, with wine during a meal often cited as an example of acceptable drinking.

Among a small number of young people in the sample was a more extreme view that drinking alcohol is in general a bad thing. Some of the young men from the focus group argued that "there's nothing good" about alcohol and that it is better "to not drink at all". Other views suggested that alcohol is pointless and has no benefits. These opinions were most common among non-drinkers, and some former drinkers. Implicit in some non-drinkers' opinions of alcohol was a slippery slope view of drinking, wherein they believed that drinking alcohol will most likely end in 'addiction', and it is therefore better not to start:

'But people will keep on arguing like, like if you have control on your drinking then it is okay. But I think once you have started there is no control ... Once you start drinking then eventually you will start losing your control.'

Young man – non-drinker

'Some people when they try drinking once, sometimes they get addicted to it and you can't help it.'

Young woman – non-drinker

'I'd just rather not start because once some people start it might be hard to know when to stop and some people become dependent on it and turn into alcoholics.'

Young woman – non-drinker

By contrast, the drinkers who took part in the focus groups described very different attitudes towards alcohol consumption. They varied considerably in how they described their own drinking, but unsurprisingly they expressed more liberal views regarding alcohol than the non- and light drinkers. Respondents often reported that drinking was a social activity that would occur mostly at the weekend, and would sometimes involve consuming large amounts in one session. Drinkers were more likely to view getting drunk too frequently or drinking alone as signs of problem drinking. Consumption tended to be limited by current circumstances such as cash flow and next-day responsibilities rather than overriding concerns about health and behaviour.

Narratives

In order to understand how young people arrived at their current drinking attitudes and behaviours, it is necessary to consider the range of influences and experiences they described, particularly as they were growing up. These are captured in young people's 'narratives': the stories and recollections that they related during interviews to help explain their current attitudes and behaviours. From the interviews we were able to identify three different types of narrative:

- One type of narrative can be described as **'consistent'** in so far as young people fitting this category have been consistent in the decisions they have made regarding alcohol use over their lifespan. Although in these cases there are again many influences that help to explain why young people do

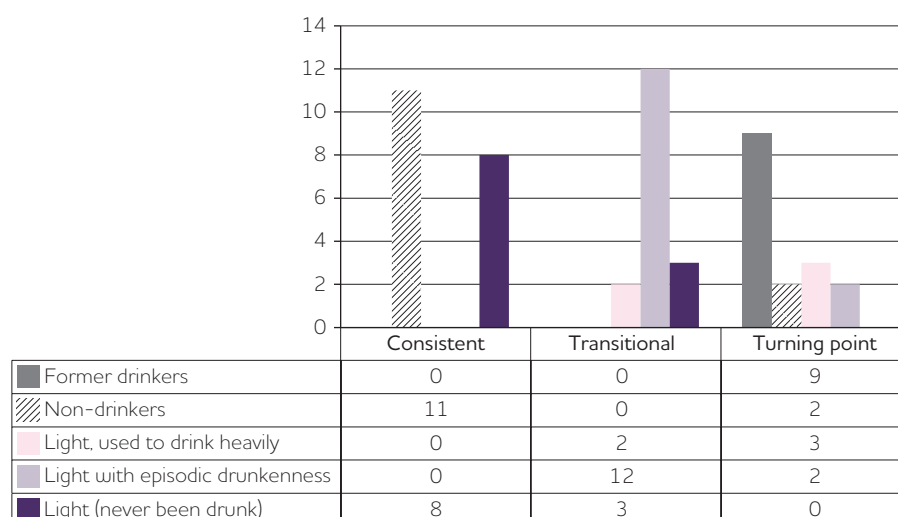
not drink or drink lightly, these influences often seem to reinforce existing attitudes and beliefs. Young people who have been consistent in their views about alcohol are non-drinkers and light drinkers who have never been drunk.

- A second type of narrative is described as **‘transitional’**. Such narratives tend to involve shifts and fluctuations in drinking over time, eventually leading to a reduction in consumption. In cases like these, it is difficult to pinpoint a specific experience or belief about alcohol that explains changes in drinking, or a particular moment in time when change occurred. A large number of these young people formed their decisions in part through their personal experiences of drinking. Fluctuations in how these young people drink are still sometimes evident and they may still occasionally get drunk or have more to drink than they planned.
- The third type of narrative involves an identifiable **‘turning point’** during a young person’s life that leads to a change in behaviour and/or a change in attitude towards alcohol. This was frequently observed in young people who were former heavy drinkers, or had a particularly negative experience with alcohol that put them off drinking. It was also noticeable, however, for two young people who had always been non-drinkers, who made a conscious, deliberate decision to not drink at a young age. Turning points commonly involved religion, health or a drunken experience.

A total of 16 young people described a narrative featuring a turning point, 17 reported transitional narratives and 19 revealed consistent decisions and attitudes towards alcohol over their lifetimes. The relationship between the different drinking types and narratives is illustrated in Figure 1.

In order to help illustrate the narratives that young people described, we will now give a few examples of their timelines. Young people were asked to record and plot the experiences or memories that were significant or stood out for them on a timeline. These experiences could include any encounter with alcohol that was formative or memorable. The timelines were particularly useful for encouraging young people to take a moment to reflect, and write down points that were relevant and important to them, but may not arise through the normal interviewing process. Although individuals varied considerably in terms of the sum of their experiences, particular experiences often reflected

Figure 1: Young people’s drinking types and narratives



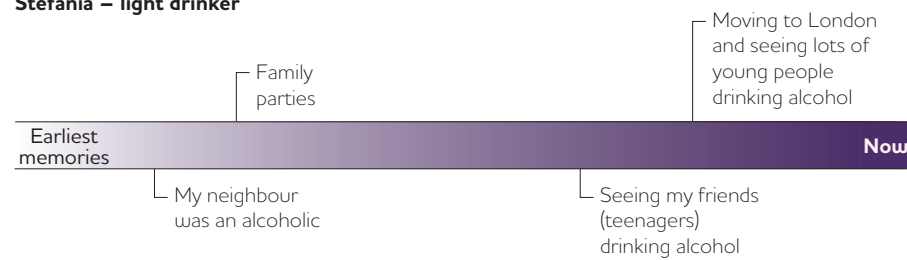
themes that could be found across the sample as a whole, and these themes are highlighted throughout this section.

Five of the timelines in this chapter are copies of the timelines that the young people produced themselves during their interviews. The remaining timeline was constructed from an interview where the respondent gave a detailed description of her 'story', and the boxes are verbatim quotes of the key incidents she described. For the purposes of confidentiality, all names have been changed.

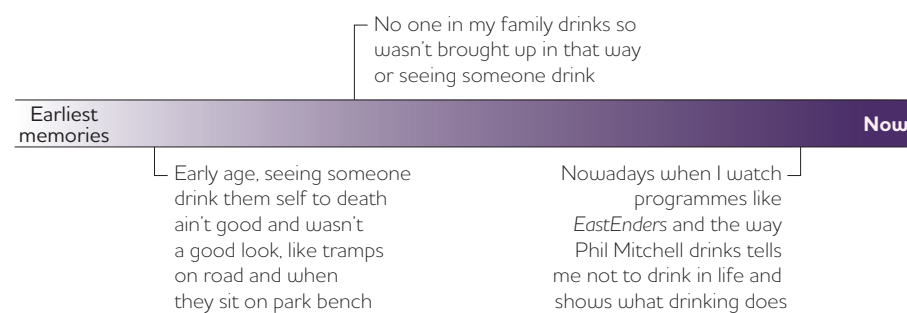
Consistent narratives

Two of the timelines for 'consistent' young people are presented below. Stefania and Thomas were both light drinkers who had never been drunk.

Stefania – light drinker



Thomas – light drinker



Stefania and Thomas began their timelines with recollections of seeing negative representations of alcohol use in their local community as they were growing up. Although Stefania grew up in Poland in a small community and Thomas was from London, the negative ways in which people with addictions were perceived by their local community was pertinent for both young people. They both recalled hearing stories about their neighbours and reported that their problems would be discussed among other families on the street. This gave them a sense of how people respond to such behaviour. Thomas reported that people no longer had respect for his neighbour who was addicted to alcohol, and that he had gained a bad name and a bad reputation. In small communities, people are particularly likely to talk and know each other's business. Stefania came from a small village and felt that people judged her neighbour too harshly: *"They don't try to understand the person, they just judge the way someone behaves and it's an illness, it's something, the person's health."*

Both Stefania and Thomas then drew on their experiences of the drinking in their family as examples of moderating influences on their behaviour. In contrast to the early negative association between alcohol and addiction, Stefania had also been exposed to alcohol in safe environments where she came to perceive drinking as something adults do to celebrate on special occasions. Only adults would drink during these occasions; children were not

offered alcohol and she was never aware of her parents drinking much: *"I just remember when I was a kid we used to go to family parties and there was alcohol involved but it was kind of a friendly way; my parents never drunk a lot."* Stefania felt that this exposure to alcohol was 'reasonable'; while there was never a strong emphasis on drinking she learned that alcohol was not a bad thing. Her parents appeared to lack interest in drinking as she described how there might on occasion be wine in the house but nobody would really touch it or think to drink it. This lack of interest appears to be reflected in Stefania's account who, although a drinker (rarely and usually limited to just one drink), failed to mention any incidents involving her own drinking on her timeline. By contrast, Thomas reported no exposure to alcohol within the family. Although he called himself a light drinker, he revealed a completely negative view of alcohol and its effects, which may be because he had no positive role models of how to drink.

As a teenager, Stefania described seeing friends on school trips attempting to buy alcohol and drink it without teachers being aware of what was happening. Although she called these classmates 'friends' on her timeline, when she elaborated during the interview it emerged that they were not part of her friendship group and she was never involved in that kind of behaviour. She described her classmates' behaviour as 'stupid' and reported that she was never invited to join them or felt pressured to participate. This was partly because she had other interests and did well at sport:

'But there was a bit of division between people who did badly at school and tried all the alcohol and things like that and those who did a bit better. So they didn't try that much to persuade us because they knew they'd fail probably ... Yeah they knew I was doing sports and I have my things so they never tried to encourage me.'

Both of the consistent young people in our examples also expressed negative views of excessive drinking that they had picked up from other sources. Thomas described watching programmes such as *EastEnders*, which he felt showed the dangerous nature of addiction: *"It just shows you if you take one sip of drink you'll be addicted to it and then you continue drinking and it would be hard to get off the drink."* He also described in detail another programme he had seen where a man had sex with a girl while he was drunk, which he later regretted and which led to an unwanted pregnancy. Media portrayals of alcohol use can be negative and unrepresentative and the lack of positive or neutral examples of alcohol use may again help to account for Thomas's extreme views of the dangers of drinking.

Stefania had also picked up negative views of alcohol, but her accounts were grounded in the drinking she saw around her in the streets of London. She described how social time for people living in the capital appeared to centre around alcohol, such as people going to the pub after work, without any 'better' ways of spending their time. The fact that alcohol is the first thing people turn to, whether for celebrations, socialising or relaxing, was a mystery to Stefania, who felt that such environments were not exciting. She felt that other options such as going to a restaurant, going to the cinema or visiting a place of interest were preferable ways of spending time.

Common themes

Several identifiable themes emerged from Stefania and Thomas's accounts of their influences and experiences, which were echoed in other young people's interviews. These included:

- **Neighbourhood impact.** Some young people learn about the potential negative consequences of alcohol use in terms of personal harm and social reputation from encountering neighbours and community members with alcohol problems.
- **Positive family role models.** The importance of family for setting boundaries around appropriate drinking behaviours was reported by most respondents.
- **Seeing friends drink.** Seeing friends and peers drink to excess, something the majority of young people had experienced at some point, reinforced the decisions of many non- and light drinkers to not drink heavily, or not at all.
- **Sport and health.** For a number of young people, sport and activities served as diversions from involvement in a drinking culture.
- **Media portrayals of alcohol.** Many respondents discussed negative portrayals of alcohol use in the media.
- **The UK drinking culture.** Young people's perceptions of UK drinking culture were mostly negative, but young people varied in how they interpreted these signs of excessive consumption.

These themes are discussed in more detail below.

Neighbourhood impact

'If a person drinks alcohol then you end up like this.'

Young woman – light drinker

A number of young people in the sample reported having neighbours with alcohol problems, leading to antisocial behaviour such as shouting, ranting, swearing, drink-driving, arguing, throwing bricks and slashing tyres. Two young people came from an estate where such behaviour was rife, but for others (including Stefania and Thomas) the drunken behaviour described was not common for the area and stood out from how other people in the community behaved.

Some of the strong messages that young people received from seeing neighbours and members of their community with alcohol problems were the long-term social and personal harms associated with alcohol use. Young people described neighbours who were unable to work and who had lost their jobs as a result of their drinking. One young person reported that two people in his community had died as a consequence of addiction and that seeing such an incident at a very young age was a strong influence on his decision to not drink.

As these experiences occurred at a young age, there was a tendency for some young people to generalise and associate the negative behaviours and outcomes they witnessed with all kinds of drinking, rather than just problem drinking:

'So like after seeing the influence on the area, I didn't need my mum and dad to sit down and be like okay these are the effects of alcohol, blah, blah, you'd just see it and it's like "Mum why is this person like this?", "Because he's had too much alcohol" and you were like "okay". You don't need to ask any more questions about that because you just know if you drink alcohol, whatever the alcohol was, you didn't know what alcohol was at that time, you just thought alcohol was the be all and end all, not that person drinks vodka or that person drinks JD, if a person drinks alcohol then you end up like this. And so you kind of think okay so I'm not going to drink alcohol ... If you see it in person it sticks in your mind more than someone telling you because it could just go in through one ear and go out the other – "Okay Mum, thanks Mum, anyway blah, blah, blah", sort of thing. But when you see it, it's more visual than it is just listening to it.'

Young woman – light drinker

Positive family role models

'There was a kind of unwritten rule that if you do go out and you drink or anything then you handle yourself in the right way and the right manner.'

Young man – light drinker

Another second identifiable theme was the importance that young people often placed on parents and family members as role models in how to drink. Parental expectations exerted a powerful influence on young people's attitudes. Many non- and light drinkers alike felt that their parents expected them to develop responsible attitudes to drinking and that appropriate behaviours were best learned from them rather than through their friendships. These expectations were rarely discussed and often implicit. Many non- and light drinkers felt that their parents had inculcated a sense of disapproval or disappointment if they did not behave according to their expectations and started drinking or got drunk. If this were to happen, young people would feel they were compromising their parents' trust:

'That look of disappointment, that look of shame, to say "I didn't raise you like this, why are you acting like this for?" I think that plays in my mind every time I go out ... I don't want my parents to see me like this because that is not the way they brought me up.'

Young woman – light drinker

Like Stefania, some light and former drinkers believed that their parents had provided positive examples of drinking in moderation by drinking occasionally and never, or rarely, appearing tipsy or drunk. In this way, parents could be seen as good role models in exercising control over their drinking and fostering the association of drinking with relaxing and pleasure, to be done occasionally rather than as part of a daily routine or with the intention of getting drunk:

'The way they handle it is very good. Especially if me or my younger brother are around they'll make sure that they don't have anywhere near as much to get them tipsy or drunk. They will make sure they have one glass of wine to relax, to enjoy and that's it.'

Young man – light drinker

By contrast, a few young people like Thomas described a lack of discussion and exposure to alcohol as they were growing up. Particularly in the families of non- or light drinkers, where drinking did not feature regularly in parents' lives, there was little discussion about alcohol; drinking was irrelevant:

'Drinking does not actually play a big part in my family and I won't say "culture" because some Malaysian Chinese, they do have a tradition of drink but us, we, alcohol doesn't play a big part. We use it for cooking.'

Young man – former drinker

Some former drinkers whose religion forbids or discourages drinking e.g. young people of Muslim and some Christian faiths, understood that direct discussions about alcohol were inappropriate and opportunities for discussion were not forthcoming; moreover, some non-drinkers reported that their parents reacting angrily when they broached the subject of drinking. These young people were assumed to have internalised and adopted their faith's teaching on drinking and, for Christians, getting drunk. While young people brought up within a religious household mostly did not remember talking about alcohol with parents, other than to reinforce their faith's doctrine, this did not determine parental attitudes to drinking or parental drinking behaviours. Some young people of Muslim religion were aware that drinking did occur and that their families did not practise all aspects of their religion:

Seeing friends drink

'Alcohol controls them and they don't really know what they're doing.'

Young man – non-drinker

Most young people like Stefania witnessed their friends or peers drinking or experimenting with alcohol, but chose not to join in. This was particularly true for non-drinkers, but also for some light drinkers who chose to drink when older under different circumstances but avoided the drinking culture of their teenage peers. Observing friends and peers under the influence of alcohol was cited by many young people as a means of learning about alcohol and its effects, particularly for young people who had not consumed much alcohol or been drunk. Being sober and around friends when they were drinking was variously described as a funny, annoying or a frightening experience. When drunkenness was not seen as too much out of control, some young people would describe their friends' behaviour as 'slightly comical' or 'interesting' and said that they would 'enjoy' the experience.

Most respondents, however, reported that drunken behaviour too often became annoying and tedious towards the end of an evening, especially when it happened frequently. At times, young people described scenarios that involved heavier drinking where they felt that friends lost control or went too far. This was a strong influence on many young people choosing not to drink excessively, and avoiding friends when they were drinking. In particular, young people who had never been drunk confessed that they did not understand why people would want to get themselves in that state. One non-drinker explained the behaviour he saw in his friends:

'I couldn't really understand why they would want to be out of control of their own selves, because that is what I saw is that they lost their inhibitions and their ability to make rational judgements, you know careful decisions in their physical relationships and things like that with other people. The fact that they couldn't get through a door and things like that because they'd walk

into the side of the door – why would you want to do that, I don't know. I don't see that as fun.'

Young man – non-drinker

Young people spoke about learning from other people's experiences; "I don't want to be like them". For young people who had never been drunk, the fear of not knowing how they might behave if they drank heavily, served as an inhibitor to drinking to excess:

'I personally feel like since I've never got drunk or never tried drinking, what will happen if I literally got drunk, so I don't know what will come out of my mouth or you know ...'

Young woman – non-drinker

'I've never been drunk myself so I have no idea what my own, what sort of drunk – if there is such a thing – what my reaction to alcohol would be. I wouldn't like to think that I would be like a particularly irritating or angry or whatever drunk, the possibility of that and seeing other people's behaviour and just thinking ...'

Young man – non-drinker

At the more extreme end of the spectrum were aggressive behaviours, violence and fighting. Young people were witnesses to these events, rather than victims, and violence was rarely described as occurring among young people's closest friends, but was primarily associated with male peers who had consumed too much. Incidents such as these tended to bring the evening to a close, and young people would argue that it is pointless to ruin a night by drinking too much alcohol. In some cases, they had witnessed friends or peers developing more serious long-term alcohol problems as a consequence of their drinking. Several young people had friends or classmates who drank 'all the time', with young people perceiving this as an example of problem drinking. One description was of a friend who was diagnosed with cancer of the liver, another involved a classmate having to go to rehab. Notable among some of the non-drinkers was a concern that drinking any alcohol may lead to addiction and problems further down the line, even if consumption initially appears to be under control:

Sport and health

'I don't want to play football hung-over.'

Young man – light drinker

For Stefania, her interest in sports was part of her reason for not drinking. Being involved with sport was for her a way of relaxing and keeping healthy and drinking a lot of alcohol would get in the way of that. Other light drinkers (and some drinkers) in the sample did not drink during periods of training or the period leading up to a sporting event. Drinking less was motivated by the need to monitor health in general, and also to ensure optimum performance levels. One of the respondents explained that his drinking at university was defined by the athletic season:

'The period I would have no alcohol was the athletic season so that's when we'd be competing and racing and then the next, say October, November, December, well, probably December, those three months it's like the down part of the season where it's just training, no competitions, that sort of thing.'

Young man – light drinker

Media portrayals of alcohol

'There is pressure to drink alcohol in the media everywhere.'

Young female – former drinker

Although many young people had witnessed social drinking firsthand and spoke from experience, media representations of drinking and alcohol use also served to influence or, more commonly, reinforce attitudes towards alcohol use. Across the sample, participants were aware of a spectrum of representations of drinking in films, television programmes, broadcast and print news and advertising campaigns both around safe drinking and those promoting brands. As is commonly the case, information that supported a predisposition to an opinion or view appeared to have a greater impact for young people. For example, non-drinkers recalled negative portrayals most readily; these included soaps and documentaries portraying alcohol and drug addiction and programmes such as *Road Wars* and *Night Cops* featuring the problems with drink-driving from the perspective of the police.

In contrast, light drinkers more readily questioned the representativeness of what they saw as the more sensational press and broadcast news coverage of teenage drinking, especially underage drinking and features on drunken behaviour by British people abroad. They felt that accounts were shaped by the media's objective to boost sales through exaggerating the scale of such incidents. This resulted in a stereotyping of all teenagers irrespective of the level of involvement. In this context, the perceived alarmist and morally disapproving tone of these accounts was thought to be self-serving in the interest of boosting 'audience' figures. While accepting both that underage drinking to excess does occur and that drunkenness can lead to violent or sexually uninhibited behaviour, their attitude was that this is not at a problematic scale overall and that the bigger picture justifies a permissive and tolerant drinking culture.

The UK drinking culture

'I think we're the worst place in Europe now. I think we are the worst drinking country. In terms of young people we're the worst.'

Young man – non-drinker

There was some agreement among young people that drinking is a problem in UK culture and that it is more pronounced than in other countries. Like Stefania, young people who had moved to Britain from abroad observed that drinking is central to everyday life in the UK and in some ways this is particular to this country; most notably the role of the pub as a venue for after-work socialising, especially in London. Although young people talked about drinking being part of life in other countries, a notable contrast was the antisocial behaviour and disorder that accompanies drinking on the streets of the UK at the weekend. The prevalence of violence and of fighting was felt to be a common occurrence, to the extent that many avoid certain no-go areas on Friday and Saturday nights:

'My landlady was a taxi driver and sometimes she would take me on a Friday and Saturday shift in the evening, after 12pm so she is not on her own and it's safer for her, so I got to know the streets as well and wow it's unbelievable, like horror movies really, like the police and fights and blood and ugh.'

Young woman – former drinker

'Oh on the tube on a Saturday night – oh! I don't know, you know when you see young people, you think "oh my God, what a waste", like I don't know you feel and everyone is just looking at them and listening to them, it's really bad.'
Young woman – light drinker

Drinking in the future – consistent young people

Young people who were categorised as 'consistent' showed consistency in their decision-making regarding alcohol up to this point in their lives. When asked about their futures, only a few of these young people felt sure that they would continue to be a non-drinker or maintain their current light drinking patterns. Some reported that they were unsure of what they might do but more commonly young people were cautiously open to drinking more in the future. For young people who did not enjoy the taste of alcohol, there was the possibility that they may find a drink they like and would maybe start to drink in small amounts. Other young people felt that they may drink to socialise with colleagues or when they earn more money. One non-drinker felt that once he had retired and had fewer responsibilities and more money he would be free to drink if he chooses. However, very few thought that their attitudes would change significantly. Young people's flexible attitudes towards drinking in the future underline how in many cases their decisions were not based on ideological grounds but arose from their experiences and circumstances. More commonly, young people expressed an aversion to the heavy drinking culture, due to the kinds of behaviour it produces, the harms that can result and their preference for other interests and responsibilities.

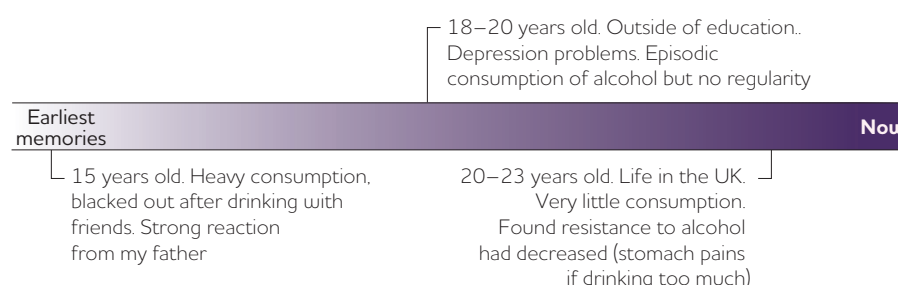
Transitional narratives

The two timelines that follow represent transitional narratives of young people in so far as their drinking attitudes and behaviours tended to fluctuate or changed gradually over a period of time. Both Adile and Edouard are current light drinkers, who have reduced their drinking.

Adile – light drinker, never been drunk



Edouard – light drinker with episodic drunkenness



Adile reported seeing her father drink heavily when she was young; this was a cause of arguments between her parents and her father was not pleasant when he had been drinking. Consequently, she gained a sense of the negative effects of alcohol. Although not mentioned on his timeline, Edouard said that his father

drank quite heavily and described his drinking as 'a bit out of control'. His father would drink when he could not sleep, and Edouard observed his father getting drunk to deal with stress-related depression. This led Edouard to consider alcohol as a possible means of managing depression and he remembered wanting to experience drunkenness as a way of escaping problems.

During adolescence, Adile began to drink with friends in order to 'fit in' but would never drink a lot and never had any bad experiences or got drunk. She said that her parents did not mind her drinking because she was responsible. Conversely, Edouard experienced heavy drinking at 15 years old when he got drunk with friends. He did not remember the incident clearly, but his clothes were torn and he blacked out. His father responded very angrily as it was out of character for his son.

Both transitional young people used alcohol as a means to an end; when they drank, alcohol had a particular function for them. Adile said that she would drink in order to feel relaxed and be sociable and that she found alcohol 'interesting'. By contrast, Edouard tended to drink alone. In this sense he was almost unique in the sample, with only one other respondent who reported drinking heavily and alone. Most young people drank with friends if they drank during their teenage years. Edouard suffered with depression and tried drinking alcohol in large amounts on occasions (although not regularly) to numb reality. Alcohol for Edouard therefore served the function of 'escapism' through a form of self-medication.

Both young people also reported experimenting a little with other substances, which was rare in the sample and most commonly reported among young people who had been drunk or were former drinkers. Adile smoked cigarettes and had also tried cannabis, and reported that she was interested in the effects that pills can have. Edouard had also tried cigarettes and cocaine, but in general did not find drugs appealing.

Adile's drinking had lessened over time; she saw herself as more mature than previously and now preferred not to drink because it would affect her studies. She said that drinking even small amounts of alcohol could lead to a hangover, making it difficult to work. However, she felt that in the future if there was a period when she had fewer commitments she may drink more, with alcohol being a 'treat'. Consequently, Adile's drinking was directly moderated by her responsibilities and commitments and choosing not to drink was a pragmatic response to the demands on her time.

When Edouard moved to study in the UK he became involved in more positive activities, developed friendships with people who did not drink and began to use alcohol in a healthier way. Edouard also felt that his stomach was too sensitive for alcohol and that it affected him when he drank. He now drank more regularly than previously, but usually limited himself to one glass. He believed that he would drink even less in future.

The function that alcohol had for both young people changed over time. Adile argued that she would no longer have a drink to fit in or have fun and that it would be solely her choice. Edouard felt that he started drinking less gradually when he realised that alcohol failed to offer the solace he was looking for. Currently, he said that his consumption was not connected to any change in mood such as loosening up or feeling more extrovert and that he drank purely to enjoy the drink itself. He believed that he would not turn to alcohol even if his depression returned because drinking did not bring about the desired effects:

'It never felt like an active decision, I didn't think about it, I should not, I say to myself I stop drinking for the rest of my life, it was more passive, I just didn't want to drink. It's hard to explain but once I got past the whole "I'm trying

to escape, this seems to be an escape for most people, I'm going to try it", nothing linked me to alcohol anymore.'

Common themes

Both Adile and Edouard reported influences and experiences that were reflected in other young people's accounts of growing up. These included:

- **Negative family role models.** Negative representations of parental drinking, particularly paternal drinking, influenced respondents' perceptions of the harms that alcohol can cause.
- **Getting drunk.** Experiences of getting drunk with friends, often unintentionally and as a means of being sociable, were described by light drinkers who had experienced drunkenness and some former drinkers, with these experiences of teenage drinking culture often discouraging them from drinking with friends or getting drunk.
- **Experimentation with drugs.** Experimentation with cigarettes and drugs was not common within the sample but was discussed by some respondents, most of them former drinkers and those who had been drunk.
- **Responsibilities and commitments.** Choosing to limit consumption due to other responsibilities and commitments was a common reason for not drinking among the young people.
- **Alcohol intolerance.** Describing a low tolerance for alcohol also emerged as a reason why some respondents preferred not to drink.

These themes are discussed in more detail below.

Negative family role models

'I can't say that he is guilty because he was smoking or drinking but he could give me maybe better education, a better example.'

Young man – former drinker

Young people were of the view generally that parents needed to act as suitable role models, but a few former and light drinkers were aware and critical of inconsistencies in parental attitudes to drinking and their actual drinking behaviours. A light drinker remembered his father acting as an inappropriate role model, stressing the need for self-control despite being a dependent drinker himself:

'I was being talked to by my father too; "you will be able to control yourself, that's the limit, there is no harm in doing things as long as you control yourself or limit the harm," he would say.'

Young man – light drinker

While drinking socially was seen as the primary function of alcohol in general, like Edouard a few other young people had experienced their parents drinking heavily and on their own. One respondent had observed his father drink heavily for a time after being widowed when he became increasingly pressurised by friends to drink. However, he now reported that his father had learned to

control his drinking. This young person felt that his father had been a poor role model and should have exercised greater control over his drinking.

Like Adile, seeing the effects of heavy drinking and dependency on family relationships was not uncommon among light drinkers and those who formerly drank. For these young people the father's drinking practices were almost exclusively the source of tension and conflict within the immediate family, although some light drinkers had witnessed the impact of addiction on relationships within the wider family context, among female and male family members. The drinking practices they observed often focused on a father drinking alone rather than in the company of others. Conflicts arose for a variety of reasons, although mostly they were a response to the father's inappropriate behaviour in setting parental norms around how young people should behave, but also in compromising their safety. A light drinker remembered arguments involving the family following drinking and driving episodes while a former drinker spoke of her mother's disapproval at seeing her father smoking and drinking in front of the children:

'When we were younger, he used to smoke in front of us and then my mum would have a go at him and say "stop smoking in front of them", so what he would do is he would take a drink outside, ... and a cigarette and he would just go and sit outside and do what he needs to do.'

Young woman – former drinker

While some conflicts were resolved, others were sustained over long periods and eventually led to separation or divorce. A former drinker and a light drinker both considered the negative impacts of drinking on family relationships. Both were determined that their future relationships would not suffer in the same way:

'They're arguing and screaming at each other upstairs and they come down and they're moody ... they're just miserable with each other. But then the next day they're fine and they're happy and I just don't, I don't want to do that with my boyfriend, I don't want to fall into that trap, so I generally just kind of stay away from it.'

Young woman – light drinker

Getting drunk

'I got completely drunk because it was the first time and I had never experienced alcohol before.'

Young woman – light drinker

Most of the light drinkers and former drinkers in the sample had drunk alcohol with friends during their teenage years; it was what other people were doing, so they drank to emulate them or to fit in. Like Edouard, many of these young people reported early experiences that involved drinking too much, to the point of losing control. Even for young people who were introduced to alcohol in the home, their experiences of heavy drinking took place in the company of friends and peers. There was evidence that drinking with parents or family on special occasions did not teach young people how to control their drinking in company, particularly when consuming heavier drinks such as spirits:

'I remember it quite well. I went to a friend's house party. I was probably about 16, which is why it was a house party. There was a lot of drink there; a lot of my friends were drinking. I got there and most of them were

already drunk because we were 16-year-olds and didn't really know how to handle drink. Neither did I. My parents had introduced me to drinking, with like maybe a small glass of wine at Sunday dinner or something, very, very occasionally and it would have to be a special occasion like I'd just done a big bit of coursework for school or something like that and yeah all my friends were drinking so I thought "why not?".'

Young man – light drinker

A range of negative experiences were associated with being drunk, and it tended to be a combination of these that young people would cite as off-putting. The desire to maintain control emerged as important for young people:

'I really didn't get much from it, I just felt I was intoxicated, I didn't know where I was, I didn't know what I was doing, I couldn't control my actions.'

Young man – former drinker

'It really made me lose control over who I am.'

Young woman – light drinker

Young people disliked the feeling of not knowing what had happened the night before and talked about blacking out and having 'blank' spots in their memory when they were unable to recall the previous evening. Making bad decisions was also mentioned frequently, leading some young people to feel worried that they had made a fool of themselves. One light drinker described herself as a "twat" when she is drunk and reported incidents that embarrassed her, such as kissing a "random boy". Similarly, another female described kissing a male friend when she was drunk, and said that the incident ruined their friendship. This was an important inhibitor against her drinking heavily again. Other young people were concerned that when drunk they became too friendly or talkative, behaviour that embarrassed them once they had sobered up. For many of the light drinkers who had had a negative experience of being drunk, this was sufficient to inhibit them from getting drunk more than a few times. Young people who reported these negative episodes tended to go on to be light drinkers rather than non-drinkers: they preferred to monitor their drinking rather than not drink at all.

Experimentation with other drugs

'I don't want to be addicted to anything.'

Young woman – light drinker

Less than half of the sample reported having tried cigarettes or other kinds of substances. Reasons that were commonly given for not wanting to try cigarettes or drugs included wanting to be in control, not wanting to rely on substances and feeling that it is not good to seek enjoyment from them. Young people also argued that drugs simply did not appeal to them or that smoking was not attractive. Health concerns such as fear of addiction and the dangers of drugs were also cited and a few young people were scared of how their parents would react if they found out that they had taken drugs. A couple of respondents reported family members with drug problems. Some young people argued that smoking was worse than alcohol because of the health effects and drugs were generally regarded as more dangerous than alcohol.

Among those who had experimented with substances other than alcohol, the majority had tried cigarettes and weed, often at the same time as consuming alcohol. Smoking weed was also commonly reported among

respondents from the drinkers' groups, particularly young men. Most of the non- and light drinkers reported that they had not enjoyed their experiences, although two former drinkers used to smoke weed regularly but had now stopped. Several young people found smoking hard to give up, and said that it was harder to not smoke than to not drink alcohol, and several still currently smoked.

A few respondents had tried other drugs, including cocaine, GHB, MDMA, Methadone and speed. Two of the respondents, both light drinkers who used to drink heavily, had done their own research into drugs and their effects and felt that certain drugs were safer to use than alcohol and that they were using them with knowledge of the potential harms and effects.

Responsibilities and commitments

'I was more mature, I had had that experience, done it, outgrew it.'

Young woman – light drinker

Adile explained that she drank less as she became more mature, and a number of respondents mentioned getting older or 'growing out' of alcohol use as a reason for not drinking. Often young people reported this at a relatively young age, suggesting that they quite quickly came to realise that drinking was not for them:

'By the time I actually got to the age of 18, I was like oh I've done all that.'

Young woman – light drinker

'It's [alcohol] gotten less since growing up, you know sort of stuff, like it went up a little bit at like 15/16 when I was going out and then it's just declined all the way since then.'

Young woman – light drinker

Like Adile, a large number of young people felt that drinking heavily could interfere with other things they wanted to do and cited this as a reason for not drinking to excess. In particular, young people felt that having a hangover tended to waste the following day. Many young people argued that they found their studies demanding and that drinking would prevent them from giving their work the focus that it needs. Respondents also talked about being tired from work, particularly young people on courses such as nursing that involve placements. The main reason for not drinking was being unable to work the next day due to a hangover:

'I've got studies and I know how much a hangover affects me and I don't enjoy it for one and I know I'm not going to get any work done the next day.'

Young man – light drinker

'I can't drink because I have to make sure I know what I'm talking about when they ask me in class and I don't seem so stupid, if that makes sense.'

Young woman – light drinker

Young people's attitudes towards drinking and studying contrasted with the popular stereotype of student drinking; a stereotype that young people did see reflected in some of their fellow students. Two participants spoke about how their peers' drinking would interfere with their ability to do their work on time:

'But those that are suffering from hangover and all, they just make the mood so depressing, they just don't know, they don't bring in the good materials, or they just don't discuss and they are just there with their arms folded or with their head in their hands.'

Young woman – non-drinker

'I have friends that go out instead of doing their work and I kind of feel a bit like a snob when I go like "oh you should be doing your work", a goody two-shoes but I know who I'd rather be at the end of the day.'

Young woman – light drinker

By contrast, for the drinkers who were interviewed for the study, being at university emerged as a unique time when excess drinking occurred. Consequently, drinkers revealed that post university, their drinking decreased, with responsibilities such as jobs taking precedence over having a good time. Drinkers spoke about not wanting to waste their day, and feeling guilty if they spent all day with a hangover. These signs of reducing consumption due to commitments were evident among many of the non- and light drinkers, with the key difference being that most of the non- and light drinkers felt this way about alcohol at an earlier age, during the period when drinking heavily was considered normative.

Alcohol intolerance

'I just have very low alcohol tolerance.'

Young man – former drinker

Like Edouard, a number of participants in the study explained that they were sensitive to the effects of alcohol and this was one of the reasons why they chose not to drink. This was mostly reported by young men. Some young people reported that they just got drunk too easily. One young man, a light drinker, said: "I can't really handle my alcohol"; another young woman, also a light drinker, reported: "I'm just not built to drink that much". A Malaysian young man talked about getting the 'Asian flush', meaning that he would get very pink, and a small amount of alcohol would make him tired very quickly. Another respondent explained that he had a number of allergies and that using alcohol would stop his medication from working; "I've known since I was little like that I can't drink because of allergies" (young man – non-drinker). Implicit in some of these accounts was the view that if alcohol cannot be consumed in large-enough quantities to enjoy the effects then there is no point in drinking it at all.

Hangovers and the after-effects of drinking were cited by many as a reason to not drink heavily, but some people felt that they were particularly sensitive to these effects:

'I don't think everyone else suffers in the same way from a hangover and I think my weak stomach means that I often get quite nauseous the next day and it's pretty unbearable.'

Young man – light drinker

Although a low tolerance of alcohol led to some young people drinking less, others preferred to not drink at all.

Drinking in the future – transitional young people

Many of the transitional young people felt that their drinking would not really change in the future, with some considering that they may drink less. Some of these young people had already experimented with heavier drinking patterns or getting drunk, and saw no reason why they would go back to that kind of behaviour. Like Adile, others foresaw times when they might have fewer responsibilities and drink more. It was more common, however, for young people to envisage that as responsibilities increased, less time may be spent socialising, and work and children would take precedence over activities that might involve drinking. How to be a good influence on their future children was something that many of the young people had thought about, with many of them wanting to emulate their parents' modelling of alcohol use. Young women in particular saw themselves drinking less when they had a family. A very common suggestion for future drinking was drinking wine with meals as a way of being social. Emulating more 'continental' styles of drinking was recognised by these young people as a popular way of drinking socially and sensibly at the same time, where the emphasis is not on drinking and getting drunk.

Turning points

The following two timelines demonstrate the narratives of two former drinkers who had an identifiable turning point that completely transformed their drinking habits. Although Helena did not complete a timeline during her interview, she explained her 'story' in detail and the extracts are direct quotes from her interview.

Helena – former drinker



Sadiya – former drinker



Both respondents reported little drinking with family, although alcohol was present. Helena did not drink much at home although she would sometimes drink champagne or beer on special occasions. She said that her parents would make her drink alcohol during those times, with her comments revealing how she felt she had little choice in whether she drank or not, the need to respect social conventions overshadowing her personal dislike for the taste of champagne:

'They said, "Come on, it's New Year, you should drink just a little bit of champagne." So I was forced to drink it, just to celebrate because everybody drinks champagne for New Year. Like my Mum and my Dad said "you should drink".'

Young woman – former drinker

Living with parents was a prohibitive influence on Helena's drinking, and she began to drink heavily when she lived abroad with friends while she was studying. Helena described excessive drinking and getting 'wasted'. Although she said she enjoyed the drinking and found it fun, she also reported that she drank mainly because it was what other people were doing, and that she disliked the taste or the way it affected her skin and hair. Due to a previous illness her liver was damaged and she was instructed by her doctor to stop drinking for at least five years.

Sadiya was a Muslim girl, from a family that did not practise their religion very strongly. She never drank with family but was aware of her father's drinking and would also see her cousins get drunk or tipsy, making her 'interested' in why they behaved in that way. Her first experience of alcohol was drinking with friends at 16 years old in the park. At the age of 17, drinking became a weekly habit when alcohol became easier to access, which Sadiya kept secret from her family. Similar to some other young people in the study, alcohol had an important function for her; without alcohol she felt that things would be 'boring' and that alcohol made her more sociable. Like Edouard, she also drank to 'get away from the world'. She generally enjoyed the drinking, although she made mistakes when drunk and had a health scare when she suffered kidney pains. At the age of 19, Sadiya felt that she had started to grow up. The trigger for this change occurred during a religious month when Sadiya spent a lot of time praying with family and fasting and decided she wanted a fresh start. In contrast to Helena, Sadiya's decision was internally motivated, triggered by a change in attitude brought about by her religion. Helena, on the other hand, felt that she had to follow her doctor's advice and her drinking behaviour changed before her attitude to alcohol did. Therefore, she found that not drinking was initially hard for her.

Sadiya considered it unlikely that she would ever start drinking again in the future. Conversely, Helena said that she may drink small amounts when her five-year period of abstinence was complete, and she would also like to get 'wasted' one more time, maybe after a big celebration.

In general, both Helena and Sadiya felt that they were 'better' people for not drinking. Helena explained that she was better because she was the same when she socialised, she did not change and she was healthier. For Sadiya, being Muslim was part of being a better person and this included not doing 'bad' things like drinking. As a consequence of abstaining, they constructed more rounded and reasoned arguments for not drinking that encompassed why it is better in general to not drink alcohol. They both claimed that they could enjoy themselves without alcohol, and discussed the health benefits of not drinking. Helena also said that not drinking saved her a lot of money, because both alcohol and clubs were expensive. Having felt that they had gained from no longer drinking, Helena and Sadiya both wished to influence others to be like them. Helena tried to persuade people who drank, including her boyfriend, to drink less in order to be healthier. For Sadiya, being a good role model for other people and having a meaningful life were important, and she felt that she would try to persuade younger members of her family against drinking.

Common themes

Several themes emerged from Helena and Sadiya's accounts that echoed many others within this study:

- **Drinking under parental supervision.** In many cases, young people's first experiences of tasting alcohol were supervised by their parents.
- **Being 'interested' in alcohol.** Also for some respondents, an interest in alcohol developed as they observed drinking, primarily within the family, around them. This interest divided those young people who chose to experiment with alcohol from those who were non-drinkers.
- **Drinking heavily with friends.** Many former drinkers had gone through a period of drinking heavily with friends and had negative experiences that influenced their decision to stop drinking.
- **Religion.** A few respondents either converted or strengthened their religious faith and consequently changed their drinking habits.
- **Health.** Within this study, health was an important reason for not drinking.
- **The cost of drinking.** The high cost of drinking was a key reason for not drinking among the light and non-drinkers.

These themes are described in more detail below.

Drinking under parental supervision

'I don't really like the taste.'

Young woman – non-drinker

Like Helena, many young people reported that their first experience with alcohol was in the presence of family. However, different styles can be seen in the ways in which parents set the boundaries for young people's drinking as they were growing up. For several light drinkers, young men and women, the inevitability that young people would drink as they got older was unquestioned and accepted by parents, even though parents were often very light drinkers themselves. These liberal attitudes were similarly evident in the way that other light drinkers were gradually introduced to drinking on holiday or on special occasions, reinforcing the idea that drinking would become part of young people's lives. Many young people grew up in the knowledge that special occasions involved drinking alcohol, as it was often then that they were encouraged to have small sips. Their age at first trying alcohol on these occasions varied from six to 16 years. Other more supervisory styles of parenting in response to young people's drinking were also evident and these were thought, on the whole, to be effective in moderating drinking. One current light drinker remembered getting drunk and, despite his protests, his mother insisting that he functioned as usual in his duties around the house. Aside from learning that he would have to tolerate the consequences of his actions, he was aware that there would be repercussions if his schoolwork suffered as a result of his drinking. A similarly indirect approach to supervising yet, at the same time, being involved in young people's drinking could be seen

in how another light drinker described how his father always took part in any drinking that his brothers and friends engaged in at home:

'He wants to know what you are doing, he wants to know what you are capable of, so he doesn't tell you, "don't do this, don't do that", just things you do, he needs to know them. So, if my brother's friends came in with a drink then they drink with him at the same table.'

Young man – light drinker

Some light drinkers enjoyed their initiation into alcohol use while others tolerated it. Many, however, like Helena, did not enjoy their experiences, disliking the taste, usually of wine or champagne. Several light drinkers and even a non-drinker described how they had been coerced into drinking on these occasions either by parents themselves or more often by uncles or aunts, an influence often disrupting family norms. Parents legitimised encouraging their young sons or daughters to drink, emphasising how it helped people to be sociable and some light drinkers remembered pretending to like the drink out of politeness. This was a common experience for young people when first trying alcohol and many, like Helena, went on to be drinkers. However, disliking the taste and smell of alcohol emerged as one of the reasons for not drinking among a large proportion of non-drinkers. Young people described the taste as "odd", "bitter" and "strong". In a few cases, young people explained that their dislike of the taste was their main reason for not persisting with alcohol and trying other drinks:

'I guess when I was about 13 or 14, I tried drinking beer and it tasted just horrible at the first try, so I didn't want to try it the next time, maybe because the taste does not appeal to me much, the beer, it's bitter and the smell, I didn't like it. So I didn't give it a try next time.'

Young woman – non-drinker

'I've not built up the taste for alcohol at all.'

Young man – non-drinker

More commonly, however, disliking the taste of alcohol was not the strongest reason that young people gave for not drinking – other experiences and perceptions tended to overshadow these early experiences.

Being 'interested' in alcohol

'As a child you always want to try out everything that you see, so I just wanted to have a taste as well.'

Young woman – light drinker

Respondents varied in terms of whether they described being interested in or curious about alcohol when they were young. One non-drinker explained that she was not particularly curious about alcohol, and related this to the absence of alcohol in the family home. A light drinker explained with regard to her friends:

'We weren't really interested in alcohol when we were young. We hardly used to go out as well, so I think now we're older we're more into drinking when we're going out, or when there's a gathering but that's it really. I don't think none of us started drinking early.'

Young woman – light drinker

In contrast, a number of young people reported that their interest in alcohol was piqued by the fact that they saw their parents drinking, leading to an assumption that it was behaviour that they would also eventually emulate. One light drinker reported that he was curious about alcohol because his parents drank, but he had little interest in drugs and smoking because they were not things he ever saw his parents do. Like Sadiya, a light drinker reported that seeing family enjoying themselves drinking made him interested in alcohol. However, over time this interest tended to fade, and two former drinkers emphasised that they were no longer interested in the effects of alcohol.

Drinking heavily with friends

'I used to, more or less just drink for the sake of being drunk and I can't say I didn't enjoy it.'

Young woman – former drinker

Both Helena and Sadiya reported minimal exposure to drinking alcohol within the family home, and described heavy drinking that occurred with friends and peers. A number of other young people also reported that their initiation into alcohol use began with friends. These young people described drinking alcohol for the first time between the ages of 15 and 18. Many of the former drinkers went through long periods when they drank heavily, often with friends, before deciding to stop. These young people reported that initially they enjoyed the drinking, describing it as 'fun' and 'exciting', and they experienced the benefits often associated with consuming alcohol, such as feeling more confident and sociable. Many former heavy drinkers drank with the intention of getting drunk or 'wasted'. It often took a significant event or turning point in young people's lives that led to a transition from heavy drinker to light or non-drinker. These turning points were frequently linked to health, religion or experiences of drunkenness. In most cases, former heavy drinkers ceased to drink at all, and argued that they were better off with their decision.

Some young people who had been through periods of heavy drinking argued that it was something that they had to experience, in order to find out that it was not for them. One young woman described it as a phase that you went through; a male interviewee argued that he needed to go through it in order to know how bad it would get. One former drinker explained that although she now regretted her behaviour, she felt that it was necessary for her to experience drinking in order to learn. A similar view was expressed by another girl who drank heavily during her teenage years. She argued that drinking and getting drunk was a phase that she and her friends needed to go through. However, she did not feel that others, particularly younger members of her own family, would need to experiment in the same way:

'I feel like maybe part of me needed to go through it just to get to where I am in my life now, otherwise maybe I would have never have got here. I try not to regret anything in life; it happened so I think okay it happened, I just want to move on from it now and just not let history repeat itself or anything, because I wouldn't want any of the younger people in my family like drinking. If I found out they were drinking I'd be really upset and I'd just be like why? ... It can be avoided but I think for my generation and my group of friends, it was a phase that we all had to go through.'

Young woman – former drinker

However, the general consensus among the young people was that certain behaviours and pastimes did not need to be experienced in order to know

whether the particular behaviour was right for the individual or not. From learning from other people's mistakes and witnessing the damaging effects of alcohol, to simply not being the 'experiential' type, many young people made up their minds about drinking without needing to consume large amounts of alcohol. They also learned about alcohol and its effects from other sources, including the societal drinking culture and media depictions of alcohol use; these all helped to feed into young people's perceptions of drinking and its harms.

Religion

'If I didn't start following my religion then I probably would still be drinking.'
Young woman – former drinker

Although the study did not recruit young people who had never drank alcohol for religious reasons, a small number of young people who strengthened their religious beliefs, or converted, and consequently changed their drinking habits were interviewed. Most of these young people had been raised with a religion but did not practise it or take it seriously when young. As described earlier, Sadiya used to drink heavily until she became serious about her religion and now no longer drank. Three of the former drinkers also no longer drank because they became Christians and one Christian now only drank lightly. Young people described how their beliefs were often strengthened during a difficult period in their lives:

'There were certain things I was going to do but thank God, God prevented me from doing them and on that night God spoke to me and said "whose side are you on?", and from that moment I turned away from that lifestyle and it's like the urge to drink or anything like that was non-existent after that, it didn't even occur to me.'
Young man – former drinker

Religion could also lead to young people drinking less during certain periods. One interviewee from the Jain religion explained that during Diwali he would not be drinking, and this was part of a wider shift in behaviours in order to observe the religion: *"Like Diwali is coming up as well, so there is a certain period where you don't drink and you don't have alcohol and you don't eat any meat or anything like that"* (young man – light drinker).

Health

'My uncle has some alcohol problems.'
Young man – non-drinker

Health emerged as an important reason for not drinking among many young people in the sample. However, this would often mean different things for different people. A few young people who drank heavily, like Helen and Sadiya, had health scares, which made them reconsider their habits. In one case, the mother of a light drinker, who used to drink heavily, explicitly warned him about the potential health risks associated with heavy drinking in response to picking him up when he was drunk in his early years at secondary school. Because both parents drank sensibly themselves, this was felt to be legitimate and helpful advice:

'I was with one of my friends who doesn't drink excessively at all, he's a sensible drinker and always has been and I had to get out halfway home to throw up because I was just that drunk ... and she said: "Do you realise how vulnerable you are? How much damage you might be doing? You are doing this way too often and you might well be doing your liver some serious damage" ... It was just the thought of, thinking of the future sort of thing, and where this pattern could lead me.'

Young man – light drinker

Some young people had witnessed dependency and excessive consumption within their families and could observe the damage to health caused directly. They were influenced by cases where relatives had steadily increased their drinking and had eventually died from liver or kidney disease and where a grandparent was left brain damaged: *"Well I don't know, he's got something like shrinkage of the brain because of how many years he's been drinking"* (young man – non-drinker).

One non-drinker thought that his family had "an addictive gene" after observing a number of addictive behaviours in his extended family. He suggested that his mother's abstinence was a response to her concerns in developing "an addictive personality" and that this provided alternative expectations not to drink in his immediate family. Similarly, a light drinker spoke of drug addiction and alcoholism in her family, and explained how that had affected her choice to not take drugs and to limit her drinking.

For some young people, health concerns centred more heavily on wanting to stay fit and healthy, as described by people involved in sport such as Stefania. For other young people, discussions about health were dominated by concerns about calories and attractiveness. One female former drinker talked about gaining 10 kilograms and a light drinker spoke about watching her friend put on weight through drinking and she did not want to do the same. Concerns about calories were not restricted to females: a male light drinker also referred to alcohol as 'empty calories'.

Concerns about health were also expressed by some of the drinkers we interviewed. Some young people reported that they would go through a period of not drinking after having 'overdone it' in order to give themselves a break. This tended to be followed by a desire to get drunk after a period of abstinence, sometimes because they felt they were missing out or because they were bored:

'Like if you do it a lot for a couple of months then I kind of get bored of it, then I leave it and then I think well actually I quite fancy doing that again, so then I start to do it a bit more.'

Young man – drinker

Many young people talked about hangovers getting worse as they aged, making them less likely to consume large amounts. Two of the older young women who drank reported that they were going to have a 'dry month' where they would not drink at all. The girls explained that they were motivated by the desire to see whether they were capable of going without drink for that period, suggesting that they were becoming more concerned about having control over their drinking: *"I want to know if I can do it, that I have the self-control and that alcohol isn't such a massive thing in my life"* (young woman – drinker).

The cost of drinking

'It seems like a bit of a waste of money really.'

Young man – light drinker

The cost of alcohol emerged as a reason for not drinking for many of the non- and light drinkers. Young people generally felt that alcohol was a waste of money, with London prices in particular cited as being excessive. This reflects the higher costs of nights out in London and the South East in general. Combined with the costs of taxis and club entry, many young people felt that it was not worth the expense. They would see their friends spend large amounts of money on alcohol and did not want to do the same:

'I just don't drink alcohol. I mean I had, it's mainly because of money, how much they cost, my friend spent £23 on three drinks, it costs an absolute fortune.'

Young woman – light drinker

'When I got older and I came here I can't afford to go out and spend fifty quid on a night out.'

Young woman – light drinker

A number of drinkers who were interviewed also expressed concerns about the cost of alcohol and said that during periods when they were short of cash they would limit their drinking or change how they drank. This included not drinking during periods of unemployment or drinking at home instead of going out to drink. The difference between the drinkers and the non- and light drinkers was that the latter often still felt that if alcohol was cheaper or they had more money, this would not lead them to drink more: *"But then if someone put on a free bar in front of me I probably still wouldn't drink"* (young woman – light drinker).

Drinking in the future – turning points

Young people who reported a turning point in their drinking were the least likely group to report that their drinking may change in the future. Two young people reported that they may drink wine with a meal, but on the whole the former drinkers felt that they would not start to drink again and the light drinkers reported that they would not go back to their heavier drinking patterns, although they would not stop drinking entirely:

'With me I wouldn't change, I wouldn't go back to drinking. I might as I grow older maybe have a glass of wine.'

Young woman – former drinker

'I certainly don't think I'd ever go back to drinking excessively, so probably not.'

Young man – light drinker

3 BEING A NON- OR LIGHT DRINKER

The previous chapter explored young people's attitudes to alcohol and their drinking behaviours (among those who drink) and considered the experiences and influences that helped inform their decision-making regarding their own alcohol use. This chapter now turns to how young people manage being a non- or light drinker. Specifically, it explores the perceptions and misperceptions associated with those who choose not to drink, and how young people respond to these in terms of being a non-drinker in drinking environments. Alternatives to the drinking culture and to drinking in general are also described as part of tackling the central focus that alcohol plays in social life.

Drinking as normative

Despite the fact that a fifth of young people in Great Britain do not drink (NHS Information Centre for Health and Social Care, 2012), being a non-drinker is still perceived as being outside the norm. This norm is apparent in media representations of young people's alcohol use and research studies that focus on heavy drinking among young people, as described in Chapter 1. Within the current study, this norm is reflected in the assumption that drinking is part of growing up for young people. Young people reported that such assumptions came from all areas of life, including parents, school, friends and peers. A number of respondents said that their parents would actually prefer them to drink a little bit while they were young in order to become accustomed to alcohol, and that parents were concerned that they would get drunk too

easily if they delayed trying drinking until later on. One non-drinker explained: *"My parents are a bit worried that I will be drinking in the future and it would be good if I was drinking now because then I will not drink in the future."* Some light drinkers believed that parents worried if their sons or daughters did not drink as they could have problems forming friendships with those who did drink. A non-drinker described how her parents felt that drinking was important in relation to employment as it was thought to facilitate socialising and, implicitly, that not drinking might hamper her working life. Another respondent revealed that people were convinced that his lack of experimentation with alcohol would lead to a huge mid-life crisis later on. Although drinking behaviours and attitudes are subject to change, these fears do not appear to be borne out by the current accounts that young people gave of their lifestyles. In general, young people could see that their parents were motivated in trying to encourage social norms that involved drinking, but many wished that their personal preferences could be respected.

Messages about alcohol from school and education were also felt by some young people to reinforce stereotypes and norms around drinking behaviour. Some female light drinkers who previously had negative (excess) drinking experiences recalled the focus in lessons as being about ensuring personal safety in public places where it was assumed they would be drinking alcohol and could possibly be vulnerable. There was no advice about not drinking or about the dangers of drinking to excess per se, but more about managing the situation when one has been drinking, such as making sure that friends stay together, arranging in advance how to travel home safely and being aware that drinks could be spiked. Some young people felt that this emphasis on moderating drinking and managing drinking situations reinforced assumptions about drinking being a normative behaviour. In comparison to the emphasis on the dangers of drugs, sexual behaviour and smoking, there was little or no sense of censure of the activity of drinking alcohol and the prevailing assumption was perceived to be accepting of teenagers drinking alcohol. Among non-drinkers there was a clearly expressed frustration at this perceived assumption by schools that to drink alcohol is the norm and they objected that the corollary of this is that to abstain from alcohol is somehow abnormal. They remember feeling angry about the lack of support for the choice of not drinking alcohol as this was felt to present drinking as more legitimate than not drinking:

'All teachers were telling us, "okay, don't drink this much because this and this happens", but no one told me that it's okay to not drink. So I think that could be a very important part for example in high school and at that age to hear that it's okay not to be part of the rest of ...'

Young woman – non-drinker

Most commonly, young people reported that their peers and friends saw drinking as normative. A few young people reported that their friends "don't care" or "don't mind" and some young people were at a stage where they had developed friendships with other young people who did not drink very much and now mixed with people who were similar to themselves in terms of drinking attitudes and behaviours. This was most apparent among older young people and young people from outside the UK who would report having friends from their home country who did not drink. However, the majority of young people in the sample had experienced negative reactions at some point from friends and peers:

'Because they drink and they think "oh my God, how can you not drink?" because as they say everyone does.'
Young woman – light drinker

'People said these things are normal and everybody is doing it and you'll be like out of society now.'
Young man – former drinker

In some cases, young people themselves shared the view that their own behaviour was outside the norm. Many of the non- and former drinkers reported that they did not know anyone else who did not drink at all, with the light drinkers often reporting that their friends drank more heavily than they did. Young people stated that: *"everybody drinks nowadays"*, *"it's not the norm to not drink"* and *"my friends are all heavy, well I would say heavy drinkers"*. These views echoed the comments made by young drinkers in the focus groups who would often struggle to think of people they knew who did not drink, and shared the view that people in general did tend to drink.

Assumptions about people who do not drink

The tendency to perceive drinking as part of normal behaviour can lead both to pressure on young people to drink and to assumptions about the nature of people who choose not to drink. Young people reported a variety of reactions from people when they revealed that they did not drink or they declined the offer of a drink in a social situation. On occasion, others would simply respect their reply. More commonly, negative reactions often arose out of three identifiable kinds of assumptions or beliefs that people would make about not drinking:

- **Assumptions about the nature of people who choose not to drink.** Negative perceptions of the kinds of traits that characterise non-drinkers were evident, with common assumptions being that non-drinkers were boring or that reasons for not drinking must be moral or ideological. This could lead to awkwardness in social situations if drinkers felt that their behaviour was being judged.
- **The belief that not drinking is not a valid choice.** In some cases, peers or friends failed to respect the decisions that young people had made, particularly where choices did not have a religious or ideological basis. This could lead to encouragement or pressure to drink.
- **Assumptions about the role of alcohol in social settings.** Some people felt that not drinking in certain situations could dampen the mood or be uncomfortable, making it difficult for the young people who did not drink to fit in and 'belong' in drinking environments.

In addition, assumptions were made as to the roles that a non-drinker might adopt, in particular, caring for those who are drunk and being the designated driver. These assumptions are discussed in more detail below, with examples of how young people responded to and challenged them.

Assumptions about the nature of people who choose not to drink

Some of the drinkers we spoke to felt that choosing to not drink was indicative of a person's personality; it reflected an aspect of who they were. Often,

this aspect was seen as negative in some way. The non- and light drinkers commonly reported that people considered them to be “boring”, “weird” or “strange” if they did not drink. Sometimes these were just impressions that young people had derived from people’s reactions, but some young people had heard these comments from others directly. These were attributes that young people tended to reject as being part of their personality, while still feeling that other people’s reactions could make not drinking awkward or difficult for them:

‘They would encourage me to come out, get drunk, come on you know why are you being boring, blah, blah, that always happens. They are always very tongue in cheek about it but they probably do see me as a little bit boring, but they appreciate the fact that I’m looking after the house at the end of the day.’

Young man – light drinker

Tied to assumptions about the characteristics of a person who chooses not to drink, were assumptions about the reasons *why* an individual would choose to not drink. One of these assumptions was that young people who do not drink do not know how to have fun, or are afraid of losing control. Another assumption was that someone who does not drink must be either religious or an alcoholic. Such a view emerged among the focus group conducted with older male drinkers:

‘My first thought would be why don’t you drink, were you an alcoholic or are you religious? That would be my first thought because everyone drinks and I can’t see any reason why you wouldn’t unless there was a reason like that.’

Young man – drinker

Young people who did not drink had also encountered similar views:

‘Yeah a lot of times when you don’t do stuff that’s the norm, it’s either just wow he’s really strange, you are just strange, or you’re a Christian because obviously Christians are really related to things like talking against things that God hates usually.’

Young man – former drinker

‘But back in my country Nepal, like some friends used to, you know, they used to tease us a lot, you know those non-drinkers trying to be a monk or a nun or wanting to join some monastery or something like that.’

Young woman – non-drinker

On the one hand, reasons for not drinking that involved religion or alcoholism were likely to be respected by drinkers. In particular, drinkers reported that they would support a friend who had a problem with alcohol and that it is disrespectful to berate someone who does not drink for religious reasons. However, assumptions that people who do not drink are afraid of losing control, or that non-drinking must be associated with a serious problem such as alcoholism or an ideology such as faith, contribute towards perceptions of people who do not drink as being ‘serious’ or ‘boring’. It can also contribute towards drinkers feeling that they are being judged for choosing to drink. One drinker reported feeling judged by her housemates at university who did not drink:

'It was quite a cultural thing because I had a lot of international students in my flat and they were very judgmental of it and they would just show it in other ways you know in ways that you do pick up.'

Young woman – drinker

A male drinker reported that he would feel self-conscious about his behaviour if there was someone in the group who was not drinking:

'I've had nights where people are out and then people who don't drink are out with people who aren't drinking that night and they sort of tend to look at drunk people as a sort of like, not entertainment, but they treat you a bit like you're drunk, you've gone past it and they're sober and you feel like they are watching you and they are watching you all be drunk.'

Young man – drinker

Most of the non- and light drinkers also felt that drinkers feel judged for drinking and consequently react negatively to non-drinkers. Young people reported that drinkers get offended or get angry when they turn down drinks even though most of the young people in the study reported that they do not judge others. Such views are also challenged by the accounts that young people gave for their reasons for limiting their drinking, which were rarely linked to an ideology or a belief that drinking was wrong. Young people also did not cite drinking problems (their own or others') as primary reasons for being a non- or light drinker. However, some young people did judge heavy-drinking cultures very harshly and such attitudes would make attendance on drunken nights out awkward for those involved. Furthermore, some young people felt that non-drinkers make drinkers feel self-conscious because non-drinking is healthier, or because non-drinkers do not need alcohol or disapprove of drunken behaviour. Although young people said they did not judge other people's choices, there was often a sense among the non- and former drinkers that not drinking is in some sense better than drinking, and drinkers may pick up on these attitudes:

'Because a lot of people understand that it's not so good to drink and it's a waste of time and they understand they can do a lot of good things, but they are not so strong to make this decision and they don't want to support you because it means you are stronger than he is.'

Young man – former drinker

Strategies and responses

Young people developed strategies and responses for dealing with other people's negative perceptions of them, and for diffusing the awkwardness that can arise in social situations as a result of these assumptions.

■ Rejecting labels attributed to non-drinkers

Many of the young people rejected other people's perceptions of non-drinking as being 'boring'. Sometimes they did this by redefining what it meant to be boring. By suggesting that behaviour that followed the crowd was 'boring', or without questioning why certain behaviours were considered 'boring', young people felt able to challenge the negative connotations attached to the decisions they made. Sometimes young people saw being weird or different as positive rather than negative:

'I think some of them saw me like an example, like when you don't want to be like others, look at X, she is not like the others, she's weird, or she's different at least.'

Young woman – former drinker

'I think it's fun to have something that shows who you are and that absolutely when you show that you have been thinking on things you are not boring.'

Young woman – non-drinker

■ Having an alternative identity

There were a number of cases where alcohol use was implicitly tied to young people's identities in so far as young people felt that their choices regarding alcohol reflected the kind of person that they perceived themselves to be. One non-drinker talked about being 'Straight Edge': a punk subculture whose members refrain from using tobacco, alcohol and drugs. She described this as a way of life that she felt reflected who she was, rather than being someone she became or a label that influenced her behaviour. Some young people had identities that did not involve drinking, such as being sporty or religious, whereas others, particularly light drinkers, simply wanted to avoid being labelled as the type of person who got drunk and behaved in a certain way; it was not part of the image that they wanted to project. This was a prevailing view in particular among women:

'Because if you are known for getting drunk and then you don't drink on one day, people will still assume that you're drunk because they know that you get drunk at this time, at this stage sort of thing. So it's like you've now just been labelled and I don't like being labelled.'

Young woman – light drinker

In other cases, young people described how not drinking became part of who they were, and in some cases helped form their identity. One non-drinker explained that due to his relative isolation in a small village he was not able to socialise with friends at the critical age when they started to drink. Although he was later around friends and peers when they were drinking, he felt that by that point not drinking had become a marker of difference to his friends and that maintaining resistance to peer pressure was a part of his identity:

'I'd say it's an important part of who I am because it's always something that, I would say that I feel slightly, it may be an arrogant thing to say, but I feel slightly proud of not drinking in face of the fact that I've always been pressured to drink by other people.'

Young man – non-drinker

■ Making sure that others do not feel judged

Some young people would attempt to reassure others that they were unconcerned about their drinking and were not judging them. This could include going to the same places as others and taking part in the same activities, without the drinking:

'They were some friends from work and I was there and I loved them, they can drink and do whatever they like, I still loved them, I don't condemn them and they were so surprised and overwhelmed and she was like "wow that's nice".'

Young woman – former drinker

'If people ask me then I'll say "well I don't actually drink", but I don't go "you shouldn't drink" or anything like that.'

Young man – non-drinker

■ **Using humour to defuse the situation**

Several young people reported that they made a joke or made light of their not drinking in order to take any gravity out of the situation, particularly when offered a drink. A former drinker who was no longer able to drink for health reasons avoided discussing her reasons with people she had just met. Other respondents explained that making a joke helped to lighten the mood:

'I realise it's the way of how you respond to them, like for example if A were to ask me "do you want a drink?" or something, if I just say something like "no I don't drink, I can't drink" and everything, then probably A will think that I'm weird ... Probably I would say something like I've got alcoholic intolerance or something and then after that A would stare at me and I would be like "no I'm just kidding, no I don't drink, you have fun", you know change it around, instead of being like serious.'

Young woman – non-drinker

'My natural reaction to those sorts of things, certainly if it's people you don't know, my reaction to it, is generally kind of slightly flippant, self-deprecating comment. So if someone is a bit cautious I'll make a joke about, I'll say occasionally I tell people that it's because I'm massively religious or occasionally I tell people it's because I used to have a big problem and that makes people very uncomfortable and I'll say that to them and it kind of just breaks it down and shows that I'm not defensive about it because there is occasionally a feeling that if someone doesn't drink that there is a problem or they are pious and whatever. So I kind of, I always feel I need to break that down and I'll say yeah it is weird isn't it, I don't have a very good reason, but I just don't do it and then try and build the conversation off the back of that.'

Young man – non-drinker

The belief that not drinking is not a valid choice

One of the challenges that young people reported facing was getting others to respect their decision to not drink. This could mean respecting a decision to not drink on a particular occasion, or the decision to not drink in general. As described above, many of the drinkers in our study portrayed a lack of understanding as to why a person would choose to not drink unless it was for a religious reason or as a result of alcoholism. Inherent in young people's comments was the view that non-drinking for any other reason was not really a valid choice. This was evident from comments that revealed that drinkers would not respect a friend's decision to stop drinking if they felt that their friend did not have a problem with drinking. Decisions that had been made recently were least likely to be respected:

'Well it's happened to me where people have said "I'm not drinking" and the first thing I say is "I'll give you a week". That would be my first thought.'

Young man – drinker

'You know it's never going to last. You've decided what you think about the way that they drink and if you think that it's fine for them then you will be like well "go on, let's go for a drink".'

Young man – drinker

'I'd probably say "why, you're young, just do it, live your life a bit".'

Young man – drinker

The experiences of non-drinkers corroborated these accounts. If drinkers did not feel that non-drinking was a valid choice, then non-drinkers were more likely to be encouraged or even pressured into drinking. Drinking small amounts or on one-off occasions was particularly viewed as acceptable and normal behaviour, making aberrations from this particularly hard for non-drinkers:

'The drinking thing, it feels like it's not firm, like it's something they can change, like it's a, I mean maybe because it's not for me a religious or a moral thing, they just don't understand it and they always think that this might be the time that it's not going to be like that.'

Young woman – former drinker

'They were just saying like, "look, it's just one-off, you know we're not saying drink a whole bottle", so they were putting me in a pretty awkward situation! Because it wasn't like they were forcing me to drink a whole bottle.'

Young man – non-drinker

In a few isolated cases young people had had their drinks spiked by friends or peers who wanted them to consume alcohol. Some young people responded angrily to these attempts to subvert their will, whereas other young people felt that their friends were perhaps just messing around and did not mean any harm:

'It wasn't nothing major, they were just joking. I think one of them was like "oh [respondent's name] have a drink" and I think they just told me it was something and I wasn't sure but one of my other friends he said "[respondent's name] it's alcohol" and I was like "oh okay". I was laughing with them and they just dropped it.'

Young man – former drinker

Strategies and responses

Many of the young people had developed their own responses and strategies for dealing with people who did not respect or accept their decision to not drink.

■ Setting boundaries before going out

Some young people reported that they informed their friends or peers about their preferences for not drinking or only drinking lightly before they socialise with them in drinking environments. This avoided any awkwardness in the moment and made young people feel that their decision had been understood prior to going out and was more likely to be respected:

'I have a group of friends, they are not really alcoholics but they like to go partying and they do drink. What I do is, I warn them before I agree to go to a party with them, I tell them beforehand, that "hey, if you are calling me to drink more than I want to and everything I'm definitely going to turn you down", I warn them before I actually go party with them.'

Young woman – light drinker

■ Being resolute

Going against the grain could be challenging for young people, with many reporting that it took strength to be able to say no in the face of pressure. Young people variously described themselves as “strong”, “stubborn”, “assertive” and “confident” and claimed that these characteristics helped them to resist pressures to drink. If they were offered an alcoholic drink these young people would simply (and politely) refuse. Although some young people reported that they naturally possessed these characteristics, others felt that they developed the ability to assert themselves as they grew older. Coupled with the fact that people were more likely to respect their decision as they got older, non-drinking reportedly became easier with age:

‘I mean maybe when I was younger it might have been a problem but not anymore. You just have to learn to be firm with people.’

Young man – light drinker

‘I have experience of two years now to fight against the flow and it’s fine now and the thing is, it was difficult when I was a bit younger because when you’re younger you want to do what everybody does, but as you become older you just know who you are and what you want to do and what you don’t want to do, so people just accept you the way you are.’

Young woman – former drinker

‘Turning the question around, I think sometimes I ask them “why do you drink?”’

Young woman – non-drinker

When asked, “why don’t you drink?”, some young people would respond, “why do you drink?”. By turning the question around, young people challenged the view that drinking was normative, and instead asked other people to consider their reasons for choosing to drink. Many young people felt that choosing to drink required an explanation as much, if not more, than choosing not to drink. Few non-drinkers recognised that they were seen as operating outside the norms of behaviour: their choices were more likely to be questioned than those who operated within perceived norms.

■ Having a ‘legitimate’ reason

Some young people in the study felt that they had to justify or explain not drinking. Sometimes they would explain their reasons quite simply, such as explaining how they had tried alcohol but did not like the taste. Others would mention circumstantial factors such as taking medication, driving or having to get up for work. Some reasons, such as driving, were more likely to be seen as legitimate:

‘When I learnt to drive and passed my driver’s test it was something that was very useful for resisting peer pressure, as if you drove to a party then you couldn’t drink and if someone says, “Why aren’t you drinking? Have a drink”, you can say, “I’m driving”, and you get no further enquiry than that, so that’s an easy way out for people who would rather not.’

Young man – former drinker

One useful example given was from a young woman who grew up in Holland and said that the Dutch had a system where the designated driver received free drinks all evening in return for not drinking and making sure that everyone got home.

'We call it Bob, so if you're Bob for the night, i.e. you are driving everyone home, you get free soft drinks because you're out there, you probably don't want to be out there, you're doing the taxi service, you get free sodas so that's great.'

Young woman – former drinker

■ Monitoring drinks

In order to avoid the risk of drinks being spiked, young people who socialised with drinkers adopted various strategies to ensure that they knew what was in their drinks. Young people would 'test' their drinks i.e. smell, take a small sip, look at the size of the glass, ask a trusted friend to try it and if unsure dispose of it or give it to someone else.

'The problem is though I do have to be cautious when people buy me drinks because obviously if you say coke and you say lemonade, they have a very big temptation to put a shot of Jack Daniels or a shot of vodka or whatever in there. So you have to like sip it a little bit first and make sure it's okay and if it's not you then just have to go to the toilet with it or something and just pour it down the toilet or whatever. So I do try and buy my own drinks, I really do and I try and ask for bottles of lemonade or coke so I can put my thumb over it.'

Young man – light drinker

■ Demonstrating commitment

Reflecting the fact that recent decisions regarding non-drinking were less likely to be respected, some young people drew attention to how long they had been not drinking in order to reduce the likelihood that they would be encouraged to change their behaviour. One young person advised others to exaggerate the length of time that they had not been drinking in order to avert pressure:

'If you have some friends, some people who don't know you, so I was trying to say that I'm drinking for a longer time you know because if you say I'm not drinking just a month, "oh don't worry" and if you say "I'm vegetarian for five years", nobody will offer you meat. Because even with eating meat a lot of people say "oh come on take it, take it", but if I'm not eating meat for a long time, so the same I think the same with alcohol. People who don't know you they can offer because they think it's so usual, it's so normal, but if you say "it's my lifestyle for a long time".'

Young man – former drinker

■ Disposing of unwanted drinks

In contrast to those who described themselves as "strong" or "confident", other young people found it difficult to decline drinks in social situations. When given a drink they did not want, some would accept it but not drink it, either offering it to another person as a 'free' drink or quietly setting it to one side. A few people, both non-drinkers and drinkers, had worked behind bars and several felt that it was polite to accept drinks bought for them by customers and either offer them to other staff or simply dispose of them:

'When I was 17, 18, 19 years old, even up to 20, I worked in a pub. If let's say it was a Friday or Saturday night and I wasn't training and I wasn't competing, if they bought me a drink I'd have one, if other people bought me a drink, I'd then have a non-alcoholic drink instead.'

[Interviewer: 'Did they mind, did they notice?']

'They generally wouldn't notice. If they did I'd usually get ridiculed for it but only in a jokey way and I'd just give them some banter back.'

Young man – light drinker

Assumptions about the role of alcohol in social settings

For many people, alcohol serves a variety of functions in social settings. Some people feel that alcohol facilitates social interaction by helping drinkers feel relaxed and more sociable. In other situations consuming alcohol and getting drunk may form the focus of social gatherings. When alcohol is seen as central to socialising it can be difficult for young people who do not drink, or do not want to drink on a particular occasion, to fit in. In particular, drinkers from the focus groups revealed that they feel that the mood of the evening will be affected:

'If they said like, if I'm with a group of friends and everyone is drinking and one is saying "oh I'm not drinking", it kind of dampens the mood, you just look at them and you're like, "why?"'

Young man – drinker

'I think when people are drinking you are kind of on a level and so say you went out with someone who said "I don't drink", you'd be a bit like "oh, how is this evening going to go then?'

Young woman – drinker

Drinking was seen as a means of putting everyone on the same level, blowing off steam and relaxing. Young drinkers also spoke about how discussing the previous night and remembering what happened would be part of the bonding experience. It was generally agreed that non-drinkers could not share in these experiences and many young people recognised that non-drinkers had a different experience to drinkers on a night out. This could mean a difference in how people interacted and bonded in drinking environments, particularly if the emphasis was on getting drunk:

'In my relationships I can't bond with people over alcohol, because when we go out and they go drinking, they have a totally different experience to the experience that I do.'

Young woman – former drinker

'I mean if the point of the evening is to go out and get pissed then it's very difficult to enjoy that if you are not getting pissed, because you are missing the whole point. It's like going to the cinema and looking the other way. I mean of course you are not going to enjoy it in the same way because you are doing the opposite behaviour.'

Young man – non-drinker

There was general consensus that not drinking in social settings was acceptable if non-drinkers could fit in with the mood of other people. Some of the older female drinkers reported knowing people who did not drink but because they were bubbly and outgoing their not drinking did not affect the mood of the evening. The onus was on the non-drinker to fit in so that their not drinking was not noticeable to others and made it easy for them.

'My boss used to have a drink problem and he doesn't drink now at all but he makes it very easy, he's a very chatty person, you don't even notice that he's not drinking even if we are sitting around playing drinking games.'

Young woman – drinker

Many non- and light drinkers were of the view that the emphasis on drinking often came from people who struggled to enjoy themselves in social environments without a drink. By contrast, some of the non- and light drinkers reported that being in drinking environments without consuming alcohol posed no difficulties for them and they felt comfortable and relaxed. This was occasionally the result of having a personality that precluded the need to use alcohol, such as being 'naturally drunk' or being 'outspoken and not shy at all'. This echoed comments from the drinkers about non-drinkers being able to manage better in drinking situations if their personality enabled them to fit in with the mood. However, this was not something that everybody could achieve and was dependent to a large degree on personality and culture. A Turkish girl explained that she would feel very inhibited in clubs without a drink, as Turkish girls were brought up to behave in a more reserved manner, a trait that she also recognised among English people:

'Personality as well I believe it plays a role because some people are just lively, bubbly, they don't need alcohol to be comfortable, they are comfortable and confident. But obviously with the British culture as well, English people they may need alcohol as well because it could be that their personality is quite introverted or whatever.'

Young woman – light drinker

Other young people differentiated between 'types' of drinking situations, for example they were happy to go to a restaurant, but not to clubs and pubs, where they felt that the focus was on drinking: *"That is probably the main reason I avoid places like clubs, but not really restaurants. I could still go to somewhere like Nandos even if there is alcohol and choose not to drink it"* (young woman – non-drinker).

There were others who enjoyed going to clubs – for the music, to dance – without drinking or drinking little, but who found pubs and bars difficult environments to be in because as one young woman explained, "you just sit down drinking". This young woman had recently started college and had turned down invitations to go to bars, choosing rather to go clubbing with her established group of friends. Others felt some degree of discomfort in drinking environments, but set that aside to enjoy being with friends.

Strategies and responses

Young people who socialised in drinking environments had often developed strategies that enabled them to feel relaxed or helped deflect attention away from the fact that they were not drinking.

■ Trying to blend in

Some young people adopted strategies to hide, or at least not draw attention to, the fact that they were not drinking alcohol. This included buying drinks such as coke or lemonade, which could look as if they contain a spirit so that they could 'blend in'. One young woman spoke of trying to "mirror" the presentation of drinks, so she would always buy her own drinks, ask for them in the size of glass that would pass for a mixer and would not allow people to taste her drink so that her 'secret' was not revealed. Another explained:

'I quite often drink lime and soda when we go out because it looks like a drink. So sometimes there is just no point in drawing attention to it, you know. They get cross if you drink water when you are out. They say you are not having a proper drink, well not cross, but they are like, "what are you doing?"'

Young woman – light drinker

'With my friends, it's like "don't drink, don't drink" but at least you've got a drink in your hand i.e. an orange juice. You are not just standing there like I'm not drinking.'

Young woman – light drinker

Young people also suggested mirroring the behaviour of others. However, some young people were more defiant and felt that non-drinkers should not have to try to emulate the behaviour of others in order to fit in:

'So there's, if there is if you've had a drink you can act drunker. Pretend, this is terrible, because actually you should just be, because everybody that, the coolest people I know are the people who will say I'm not doing it, I don't feel that good, or in the middle of a party "Oh man I'm ... I'm going to bed." I'm just like, "Go you for just doing what you want and saying fuck off to everybody else."'

Young woman – former drinker

■ **Having someone else there who does not drink**

Young people reported that having a friend or someone else present who did not drink made socialising much easier as it reduced the isolation and made them feel as if they had an ally:

'I do know some people, not very close friends, but I do know some people who don't, so it kind of makes me feel more comfortable as well, at least I'm not the only one.'

Young woman – light drinker

'I think it's because I feel comfortable in myself and knowing that I'm not the only one, and definitely [my boyfriend's] influence in not drinking makes it easier for me not to drink. There's been an occasion where one of the other guys who was going out with us, he couldn't drink because he was the driver and we both found it easier because there was somebody else there who was kind of on your side ... it's definitely much easier if you've got a friend there that holds the same values or isn't drinking for a specific reason.'

Young woman – light drinker

■ **Learning to be sociable without drinking**

Although some young people were naturally comfortable around drinkers when they were not drinking, other young people said that they learned over time how to get used to not drinking. One of the male drinkers reported knowing a girl who could not drink because she was allergic to alcohol and initially found it very difficult to socialise with her friends without drinking. Over time, however, she reportedly learned how to cope and reached the point where she enjoyed herself. The male drinker could not imagine being able to do the same, but several non- and former drinkers were testament that people can adjust over time:

'But it's okay. In the beginning it was hard for me and everybody asks all the time why I'm not drinking, but I think now I'm so social that no one recognise that I'm not drinking because everybody has fun.'

Young woman – non-drinker

'When I was partying I just had to get used to it. I still couldn't realise that I'm not drinking because you feel different, when you drink you do crazy stuff. So maybe it's three or four months, or maybe longer, I don't really remember, quite a long time, not just like two parties and I'm okay with it – it took some time to realise.'

Young woman – former drinker

■ Limiting consumption in drinking environments

Some young people were happy to drink on social occasions but preferred to limit their drinking to one or two drinks, and avoid drunkenness. To avoid excessive drinking, some young people reported 'nursing' their drinks to make a drink last longer, avoiding buying rounds and going only for a short time to events where the focus is on drinking (i.e. arriving late or leaving early). For people who find it difficult to monitor how much they are drinking, it was recommended to keep track of how many drinks they have consumed. This advice came from both light drinkers and non-drinkers:

'I think my number one thing would be to say count the drinks. You can start there. If you always make sure that you know exactly how many you've had then you can definitely at least start to take steps in the right direction to know how much you want to control it.'

Young man – light drinker

■ Being able to walk away

Some young people emphasised the importance of being able to walk away from a difficult situation. This included walking away from friends who were exerting pressure to drink, or even going home or moving on to another event if a situation was becoming difficult. One young woman described how she would walk away from pressures on her to drink, while a young man talked about always having the option to leave any evening out if he chose to:

'I just say no and if they carried on. I'd just generally walk away, not in a rude way, but just like "oh I'm going to the toilet now" or something like that.'

Young woman – light drinker

'If they are particularly, if they are getting particularly irritatingly drunk, which is very rare I would say, I've never seen them get really irritating, but if I do London is easy enough to just move yourself out of that situation and get home or go and do something else or there will be a couple of other people who I know who aren't drinking and I can go and do something else. So it's never, I can always remove myself from the situation. Even when I was younger I would always give myself that kind of walk away power in case things get, I don't want to be responsible for other people or what have you.'

Young man – non-drinker

■ 'Being 'mum': the limits of being responsible for others

Young people felt that some drinkers assumed that non-drinkers would always be the designated driver and would take on a caring role if required. Although in drinking situations (e.g. house parties) young people often found themselves

taking on a caring role or, as several people noted, “being mum” for those who had drunk too much, they often did this somewhat reluctantly, placing boundaries on what they would do (i.e. put someone in a taxi rather than take them home) and differentiating between close friends and acquaintances (i.e. they will look after a friend rather than an acquaintance):

‘[T]hat is the only thing that I get cross about being the only like sober person quite often is that you are always the one looking after everyone else.’

Young woman – light drinker

‘I just think it should fall to the person who’s the most competent to look after. I don’t mean like, make sure everyone is, you know, make sure everyone’s, not mollycoddle them but just at least make sure they all get in a taxi home, or something like that. Make sure they’re all safe, if not completely happy.’

Young woman – light drinker

One young woman vividly described an all-night event run by her friend (see the box below – “It’s like I’m not your mum, okay?”) where she found herself ‘babysitting’ a younger woman she knew. Her account encapsulated the frustrations that some young people expressed. On the one hand, they were irritated at having to deal with the negative consequences of other people’s (adults’) decisions (i.e. to drink heavily) and what they regarded as a lack of personal responsibility; on the other hand, they felt morally obliged to help if they thought that someone was vulnerable (e.g. to injury, sexual assault etc.).

Another young woman was adamant that she did not want to take on the role of carer. She stated that she would not choose to be friends with someone who got drunk every weekend, as she did not want to take on the caring role; moreover, she felt that some people would assume that if she stayed sober then they would be free to get really drunk and she would look after them. In similar vein, she was hoping to get a car, but was reluctant to be ‘designated driver’ every time: “I would like take my fair turn but I wouldn’t, not every time ... I just don’t think it’s fair and as well, I don’t think my friends would mind taking their turn driving themselves” (young woman –light drinker). Driving gave young people a ‘legitimate’ reason for not drinking alcohol and some found it a useful strategy for not drinking. However, while some were happy to be ‘full-time’ drivers, others did not want to always have to drive and found it irksome when drinkers assumed that non-drinkers would drive.

“It’s like I’m not your mum, okay?”

One young woman described how she ‘babysat’ a younger woman:

‘[O]kay she was just dancing with anything moving, the banister, the wall, the door, the bouncer, any person that walked past her she was just ... it was slightly embarrassing and she’s 18 and I’m 22 and I kind of think to myself “wow when I was 18 I was nothing like that and I do not want you to end up like ... you are too young to be undone” ...’

She was concerned by the younger woman’s vulnerability, so tried (but failed) to stop her from drinking more alcohol, but then managed, she thought, to settle her down:

'So you literally, you are all over the place, you see her sitting down, peacefully with a glass of water, you take your eye off for a second and she's gone. "Where's [name] gone?" "I don't know I thought she went outside." You go outside. She's not outside. You go upstairs. She's not upstairs. You go downstairs. Oh she's dancing on the bar. Why is she there?'

She organised for this younger woman and two friends to go home, paying for the taxi and giving strict instructions to the driver not to let the girls go anywhere but home. The next day she telephoned to check that they were alright. This process took away from her enjoyment of the evening:

'You don't have a good time because you are constantly worrying about other people. Like you've gone in and you've paid, you just want to sit down and have a drink and just be like "Hey I've had a really long week, let's have some fun." ... And you feel to yourself, "I wouldn't want to go out with you again because I know how you are and I can't be dealing with you because I want to have fun as well, I don't have to be babysitting at all.

It's like I'm not your mum, okay? I technically shouldn't be responsible for you whatsoever, what you choose to do, you're 18, you're an adult as far as I'm concerned so you can choose to do whatever you want, but because I know you and I know how vulnerable you are, I have to take that role." I can't watch people, I hate watching people just deteriorate in front of me ...'

Young woman – light drinker

While there were varying degrees of resentment for some young people about 'being mum', others embraced the caring role, indeed seemed to relish it, in particular one young man who saw it as his central role within his main friendship group from his home town:

'So I go with them, I go with them and make sure they're okay, whenever my friends go out, I'll go with them and have a good time, go wherever they go, but I'll probably just have cokes or lemonades or whatever, because it's a lot cheaper as well and I find my friends spend loads of money on drink and I can go out with £20 and have a couple of cokes and I don't want another drink anymore and I'm fine. So I just help them get in the taxi once they are absolutely drunk and that's about it really, help them home ... To be fair I quite like it because I feel like I'm helping if you know what I mean. I know they are having fun and they can have all the fun they want to a point and then there's me there in case things do get out of hand, who is sober, if they have a run-in with a bouncer of a club, then I can sort it out. If they have, I don't know there's been times when they've picked up traffic cones and stuff and I've told them "no come on, put it down" and if I was drunk as well, I would probably have gone along with it. But I like the fact that I'm not because it means we can go out as a group, have fun but there's always someone there to make sure it stays within boundaries, which sounds a bit boring, but it just stops things getting out of hand to be fair.'

Young man – light drinker

This particular young man regularly went out of his way – literally walking miles from his home or paying for taxis – to ensure that his friends arrived home safely. He thought that his friends appreciated him taking on this responsibility as he often received ‘thank you’ text messages the next day. At university, he had taken on almost a parental role with his housemates:

‘[M]y housemates go out maybe once or twice a week to get absolutely hammered and I stay in purely to let them in and make sure they don’t cause any havoc with the house because obviously we are renting and the landlord, we are on a professional rent as well. So we are not on a student let so the landlord is very strict ... So I basically stay up until two or three in the morning some nights just to make sure I can let them in the door because we’ve had problems where they haven’t been able to get in and one of them slept on the stairs outside and stuff like that. So it’s just better if someone is in and sober and staying up ... they’ll leave beer cans and beer bottles around and I’ll go around after they’ve gone out and clean up the whole house and make sure if the landlord was to come round the next day that everything would look okay and then let them in at the end of the night and make sure they’re in their bed and whatever they do in their bed is their issue. But at the end of the day I think they appreciate what I do as well so yeah.’

Young man – light drinker

A less common role, which this young man had also played, was that of ‘peacekeeper’, by ensuring for example that drunken high jinks did not “get out of hand”. Others had needed on occasion to defuse tricky situations:

‘There were a couple of times where, I remember one rugby club party where a friend of mine who was a bit of an angry drunk, so I remember spending half of that evening holding him back from wanting to duff someone else over for some minor infringement. So once you start to get into that point where people are that far gone, usually I think at that point I’d probably head home anyway, I mean once it gets to a certain point in the evening it gets awkward if you are the only person who is not drinking.’

Young man – non-drinker

This section has explored how the young people in the study dealt with assumptions and norms regarding alcohol use, and how they negotiated being a light or non-drinker in drinking environments. An important issue that many young people raised, however, was the need to consider social alternatives to the drinking culture, with activities and pastimes that did not centre around, or necessarily involve, alcohol. A few young people led lives that meant they rarely came into contact with alcohol:

‘Well usually with my Christian friends we are not usually in that environment where people drink alcohol, like if we go to a house dinner they don’t have alcohol in the house, nobody even wants it, it’s not a problem, ‘cause you know, most of us don’t drink alcohol anyway.’

Young man – former drinker

For some young people, this was a consequence of avoiding drinking environments, and sometimes drinkers. For a few of the young people, this avoidance began during their teenage years and drinking with friends was not something that they were heavily involved with as they were growing up. Inherent in many of these young people’s accounts was an interest in activities that did not involve alcohol, or a preference for avoiding certain behaviours

that were attractive to some of their friends. Avoidance of drinking did not appear to result in fewer social contacts and a lack of participation in social activities, however, as the majority of the young people in the study reported leading busy and varied lives.

Alternatives to drinking cultures – day-to-day lives

As just mentioned, most young people in the study led busy and varied lives. While the majority were full-time students, their studies were often combined with either part-time paid work or voluntary work. As one full-time student explained:

'I still work [paid] there like two days a month, very little, just as another source of income and I work here [voluntary work] obviously and I do other voluntary work for law centres and volunteer work as well for the Law Society ... it's sometimes difficult, but I love it, I love to be busy.'

Young man – light drinker

Young people created opportunities to relax and take 'time out' from their studies and they spoke about doing what they saw as the 'usual' things, such as reading, spending time with friends and (to a lesser extent) family and watching films (at the cinema and at home):

'When I do have free time, which is rare at the moment ... it tends to be just hanging around with friends, just the standard sort of going to the cinema, meals out, those sorts of things. But yeah that's pretty much it generally.'

Young man – non-drinker

'Well I draw sometimes, I love reading books, I also love going to the cinema with friends and family and I also like hanging out with my friends.'

Young woman – light drinker

Two types of activity in particular emerged as important – creative arts and sport – which for some individuals were a central part of their lives, occupying a large amount of their time. Respondents were engaged in a wide variety of creative pursuits, including photography, writing, art (i.e. drawing and painting), designing and making clothes, dance, making films and music:

'[W]hen I'm not working or at uni I'll, I try and write my own stuff 'cos I don't want to never do that, and the biggest advice I always get off writers is always write anything all the time, even if it's utter rubbish, you'll know that that's rubbish and you can work on it. I like drawing and designing clothes and I do performing arts at a drama club, which was my first kind of big passion so I'm getting back into that.'

Young woman – light drinker

'I like all kinds of art and I'm very creative and I think all my life I always have, before everything else I have, I want to spend time for myself and do things that I like ... I do photography, illustration, graphic design, fashion, so everything.'

Young woman – non-drinker

Sport was integral to the lives of many respondents. For some, sport was primarily about 'keeping fit' (e.g. going to the gym and running); for others it was

more of a social activity, primarily about having fun and enjoying themselves (e.g. playing football, tennis etc. with their friends); and for a few it involved competing at a senior level, which entailed considerable commitment:

'Sport, I love playing football, football is my main thing but other stuff like cricket, basketball, but football is my main one and Xbox – I'm a game man as well.'

Young man – non-drinker

'Then I am now playing tennis, I like sports very much, I am very competitive in sports, so I do tennis. I am a member of the university tennis team, going to be representing them at competitions.'

Young woman – former drinker

For one young employed man who had competed at national and international levels, training occupied most of his free time:

'Most of my free time is taken up with athletics, so track and field, but it's obviously track, just sprinting. I train five or six days a week, which is pretty much most of my free time and then at the weekends if I've got time I just meet up with friends, usually people I train with and that is my leisure at the moment. Especially the summer months between kind of I'd say March/April time right through to September, that's primarily the outdoor athletics season.'

Young man – light drinker

Young people identified the benefits of taking 'time out' from work or study in particular, returning refreshed and being able to maintain a perspective on their lives. While drinking alcohol is often associated with taking 'time out', for these people it was not, with alcohol being incidental rather than integral to their social lives, and they found many ways to enjoy themselves that did not include alcohol or where it was optional. Even within drinking situations, some young people tended not to drink alcohol:

'So I'll go for like a five-mile run in the evening just to relax. I do jive dancing as well so I'll go and do that once a week. It's just nice for a couple of hours, to relax and let go and forget everything for a day or half a day or three hours.'

Young woman – light drinker

'So yeah I suppose we just go and dance, we socialise with people, we meet loads of people at those sort of events, it's just yeah what you do minus the drinking.'

Young woman – light drinker

They also tried to encourage their friends not to 'default' to simply going out drinking, but to engage in other activities where drinking would play a more peripheral role:

'I'd say the offers that I get from friends to go out, you know 90 per cent of them are all, "let's just go out and drink", "and do what?", and "yeah, let's just go out", it's like "no, go out and do something, go out and see a play and have a drink, let's go out and see a film but not just go out and drink for drinking's sake".'

Young woman – light drinker

This contrasted with the drinkers who often reported that drinking would be the focus of social occasions, or that socialising would involve drinking venues and would tend to lead to drinking. In particular, some of the older male drinkers reported that they saw no point in going to the pub and not drinking alcohol, and that limiting themselves to just one drink would also be difficult.

As well as leading busy lives where alcohol use may be marginal or non-existent, young people also offered suggestions about alternatives to socialising other than drinking, or that minimise the role of alcohol and are therefore more inclusive. A frequent complaint from young people was the lack of social activities that do not involve drinking, in society in general and within institutions such as universities. Young people spoke about how parties involving alcohol were promoted on university premises to raise money for student unions and how entertainment venues in inner-city centres promoted or encouraged alcohol use. This resulted in a lack of alternatives and was felt to be a factor in why young people who wanted to socialise started drinking:

'There is not enough things for young children to do. This is one thing I'm really passionate about like, I'm always saying to my friends, every night if you go out and it's eight or nine o'clock, all there is to do, is restaurants, bars, clubs and nightclubs. There are hardly, I don't see any variation these days on the street, like there might be a certain place where you can go to do bowling or the cinema or stuff like that, but I don't think there is such a variation for young people. So it's like for young people what do they do, because like they can't get into some ... some people when they are at that age, they can't get into nightclubs, or they haven't got the money to go to bowling or the cinema so ... and because it's so cheap, alcohol is so cheap nowadays that they can get hold of it and they buy a bottle for like a pound and then they are drunk and it's their night sorted for a pound ...'

Young man – light drinker

Similarly, a young woman emphasised the need to offer young people alternative activities and encourage interests as otherwise young people may turn to drink and drugs. She felt that encouragement from parents was crucial for enabling young people to become involved in positive activities:

'Just give people something to spend the time somewhere like sport, acting, whatever someone likes and then they will just have something to do, not go to the pub or sit somewhere in the park and drink with friends. If they don't have anything to do they'll just go and drink or find some drugs or ...'

Young woman – light drinker

The young people in our sample had decided that they did not wish to always be drinking when socialising, and spoke about alternatives that they had encountered. These included arranging different activities with friends who drink; the promotion of social events that did not involve alcohol; and creating spaces for young people that were similar to drinking environments, but did not include alcohol.

Doing alternative things with friends who drink

Often young people reported that they liked to go bowling, to the cinema or to have picnics – activities where the emphasis was not on drinking, although the option may be there for drinkers to drink if they wished to. One respondent reported that he would turn down his friends if they wanted to go drinking, but would make it up to them later by organising something social without the alcohol:

'Say for example I have friends who want to do a birthday party in a club, then I'll just say, "okay I won't come, but I'll make it up to you", we'll go and have a meal or something somewhere else at some other time and thank God usually that has been working out okay.'

Young man – former drinker

Promotion of social events not involving alcohol

Although parties involving alcohol tend to be promoted quite heavily within universities, some young people reported that non-drinking events are also sometimes promoted, and if organised well can be popular with students:

'You know, there was a tea party here, a couple of weeks back and just loads of people got together and had a big tea party on the lawn. Just loads of little things like that, but don't charge like ridiculous amounts for them because then people would rather go out and spend that money on drink. Do little, free, fun events.'

[Interviewer: 'That don't involve alcohol.']

'Well, during the day, or you know just, I think everything that's advertised here, 99 per cent of it is a night out in the SU [Student Union] downstairs, which is not crazy great. And I think that if they, if universities are really looking to make a change they should do stuff like the tea party or advertise, like when the drama students do shows, properly advertise them, not just pop a few posters, like encourage, go into classes and encourage them to come in and stuff.'

Young woman – light drinker

Creating alcohol-free spaces similar to drinking environments for young people

Young people spoke about the need for youth centres and similar venues where young people can socialise and participate in social activities similar to those available in pubs, such as playing pool and watching sport, but in safety without the alcohol. One young person gave a detailed example of a club he belonged to when he was 16 years old, which offered these benefits, although it tended to be expensive, which would prohibit young people from poorer backgrounds from being able to join:

'Young people should be given other outlets, there should be, I don't know, youth centres that are free with pool tables in and stuff that serve coke and lemonade. That would be great because when I was 16 all I wanted to do was go in and play pool for hours and table football and table tennis and stuff, just be social with mates in a social environment, but without the beer, that's it. I don't think there is enough of that around. There was a local pool bar near my friends and we used to go there because they'd let you in if you were 16, you just couldn't drink. You had to get an ID and you had to show proof of age and stuff and they wouldn't serve you without showing your member's card and your member's card would say on it, 16. So they wouldn't let, they wouldn't serve you ... and it was great because we used to go and order, we'd just go up to the bar and have a packet of crisps and a couple of cokes and lemonades or Fantas or whatever and just play pool for hours on end with the sports channels all on and stuff and it was great.'

[Interviewer: 'So you still get to be in that kind of informal environment and sociable.']

'Yeah and there were other people, you know we'd go in the middle of the day obviously, but there were other people casually drinking there as well, so it kind of felt like you were in a pub but there was no, you were under no danger, because there was CCTV all across it because it was quite a big pool hall and there was obviously the sports channels going, one with football on, one with rugby on, one with horse racing, one with tennis. So you could watch any sport you wanted and you could buy whatever you wanted there, they served food, they served drinks, they served everything, you could play pool, table football. Yeah it was just pool and table football but you could do those things in an informal environment and be in no danger at all. But obviously you had to be a member and it cost quite a bit per year to be a member, which was the problem. Even off-peak membership it was quite expensive for 16-year-olds.'

Young man – light drinker

Concerns about safety and vulnerability

During the course of discussing drunkenness in particular, a common theme arose over young people's concerns over their personal safety and vulnerability. Their concerns arose partly from observing other people's behaviour, including that of family members, and often partly from parental advice about the risks involved in drinking over limits.

Risks involved compromising the safety of others as well as oneself and could originate from within the family itself as well as from others. One non-drinker had seen her brothers and father become very violent after getting drunk; although this did not affect her safety directly she felt it would bring disrepute to her family. Aunties and uncles were often cited as pressurising young people to drink, especially when they themselves were drunk. A light drinker contrasted her parents' controlled drinking with her auntie's misjudgement in giving medicine in a dangerous manner when drunk, and understood better how drinking could make people around the drinker vulnerable. Other young people had been directly advised by parents to avoid being in a car with drivers who drank. Sometimes contradictions in parental advice and their observations of others' behaviour were evident. One light drinker described how his parents had warned him about the dangers of drinks being spiked, yet unknown to him, their friends had mixed spirits into his soft drink when he was 16 years and approaching adulthood.

City centres were singled out as places where excessive drinking takes place. Some respondents contrasted how young people drink in rural areas as opposed to urban areas. In rural areas there is much less opportunity to go to clubs and a greater prevalence of field parties and house parties. As a consequence, the social group tends to be well known to each other rather than anonymous and the young people described the mood as more relaxed. Friends were portrayed as an important and reliable support for personal safety. In urban areas, events occur in professional venues such as clubs and raves and the social crowds are more mixed, with greater anonymity. The desire to gain access to clubs leads young people to act illegally by faking their ages and identity papers and there is also less surveillance by parents and the wider community.

“I want to be able to get home safely”

Young people frequently cited concerns about not being able to get themselves home if they were drunk and this was a reason for not drinking heavily when going out. This was most pertinent among the young people in the sample who had moved city or town for university, with London in particular seen as a potentially dangerous place. Combined with the concern about getting home, was the fear that new friends or peers would not look out for them in the way that friends from back home might, and young people did not always feel safe around people they had not known for very long:

‘I want to keep myself conscious enough to be able to get home, so I haven’t drunk anything since I’ve been in London.’

Young woman – light drinker

‘If I did want to drink I wouldn’t feel safe either because it’s not with the friends back home, because of the fact that I know that if I did drink, people would look out for me, in a bar, in a club, in a pub wherever, they would look out for me back home, whereas I’m not so sure about my housemates.’

Young man – light drinker

Young people also learned about different relationships with drinking alcohol by working in local bars and serving customers. Seeing customers with heavy alcohol problems helped young people to learn about the boundaries of acceptable and excessive use.

‘When you are working behind the bar, you also see the other side of it, where people drink for the sake of drinking, get depressed, down, they come out to drink and they’ll ignore their family, they’ve got other commitments, but they’ll drink because they have to drink. I think when you work on a bar you see both sides. Then it makes you realise okay I am going to have a few drinks and have a good time, but it also kind of makes you realise where you should draw the line and think okay look what this could do in the long run.’

Young man – light drinker

The UK drinking culture – the broader context

By suggesting alternatives to alcohol when socialising, young people’s recommendations challenge the centrality of alcohol for socialising in the UK, and many young people felt that the heavy drinking culture in the UK needs to be addressed. Part of the perception of the drinking culture as problematic that has been publicly aired is that of ‘binge drinking’ especially by younger people. This includes those below the legal drinking age and was thought of by the young people in the study as a problem particular to the British. It led to speculation about the most appropriate legal drinking age; it was thought that lowering the drinking age may move the problem out of public places, streets and parks and into controlled premises such as pubs but would not resolve the problem of young people getting drunk, while raising the drinking age could perhaps exacerbate the problem by driving drinking underground and into places such as house parties. Younger people also commented on the availability of alcohol in shops and off-licences and the special offers that make alcohol accessible as being part of the problem, reflecting public debate on this issue. Some participants were particularly conscious of the ‘night-time

economy' and the money generated for businesses within the 'entertainment industry':

'Really it's about is money, money, money, money! That's it. If you can make a quick buck out of an over-18 rave that you've sold a shot at £2 or something and there's about 50,000 people, you are quids in.'

Young woman – light drinker

There was criticism from some with regard to the ways in which venues such as bars and pubs were thought to be set out to encourage fast and heavy drinking in contrast with bars in Europe. In these venues, characterised by their 'vertical drinking' designs, there are typically fewer tables and chairs and the music is played so loudly that it is difficult to have conversations. Layouts with plenty of seating were felt to be more conducive to choosing not to drink alcohol and also to drinking more slowly:

'Here they pump the music up so you can't hear anybody ... you are forced to drink because what else are you going to do? [Whereas in other parts of Europe] You are there for as long as you want to be, even on one drink or two drinks, it's fine, it's laid back.'

Young woman – former drinker

Some young people were also aware of the costs involved to the health service, especially to the accident and emergency departments of hospitals on Friday and Saturday nights. In this context they recognised a greater need to promote drinking more responsibly.

There was little consensus about the role that schools ought to play in educating young people about alcohol use. Some young people, particularly non-drinkers, felt that teachers needed to place more emphasis on the health effects of alcohol use. However, these young people had often arrived at their decision not to drink through other means, and their views would have been bolstered by their education, rather than informed by it. Other young people acknowledged that personal experiences and observations played a more powerful role:

'And having been through school I don't, I can tell you that it's not, the advice isn't always taken particularly seriously especially when they can see that people who are older than them always drink a lot or all the time and they don't know anyone who's had liver cancer or anything like that.'

Young man – light drinker

'I hear a lot that schools should do something, but I don't think it's the work of school, students don't want, I remember myself you don't want to listen to teachers, what teacher says, so it's more to do with parents, just give people something to spend the time somewhere like sport, acting, whatever someone likes and then they will just have something to do, not go to the pub or sit somewhere in the park and drink with friends.'

Young woman – light drinker

'But yeah like I say I had already made my decisions about those kind of things before these people came in saying don't do it, this is what happens you know, the workshops, this is based on a real-life story, someone drank/drove and had a crash or whatever. So yeah it's, I don't know why I made those decisions but I did and no influence was given by those talks that I had at school at all.'

Young man – light drinker

4 CONCLUSION

Summary of findings

Discourses around young people who do not drink or drink little often revolve around portrayals of these young people as socially isolated and dull. Yet the young people we spoke to who chose not to drink, or drink lightly, do not fall into easy stereotypes. While they acknowledged that young non- or light drinkers are often perceived as 'boring', this is a label they rejected. Our participants lived busy and varied lives, engaging in a range of leisure interests (e.g. playing sport, photography, dancing) and enjoyed doing the 'usual things' (i.e. spending time with friends, watching films etc.). The vast majority were studying full time and this was often combined with either paid or voluntary work.

Their choices were shaped in diverse ways and their lives often reflected involvement in activities where alcohol rarely plays a role. Diversity could be seen in:

- their current drinking behaviours and the pathways that had shaped their behaviours;
- their attitudes to alcohol and its effects;
- their reasons why they had adopted their behaviours;
- the extent to which their choices about drinking were part of their identity;
- how their attitudes and behaviours challenged wider social and cultural norms around alcohol directly or in more strategic ways e.g. in how they managed drinking lightly or avoid alcohol.

Our participants either did not drink alcohol (22) or drank small amounts infrequently (30). Neither was experimenting with cigarettes or drugs common. Five types of young people were identifiable: those who had never drank alcohol; former drinkers who no longer drank; light drinkers who had never been drunk; light drinkers with previous episodes of drunkenness; and light drinkers who used to drink heavily.

Three narratives could be identified in our study encapsulating the journeys that the young people made to arrive at their current drinking patterns and attitudes:

- **'Consistent' narrative.** Young people who were consistent in their views and behaviours regarding alcohol were non-drinkers and light drinkers who had been never drunk and had unwavered in their views across their lifespan. Although in these cases many influences helped to explain why the young people did not drink or drank lightly, these influences often reinforced existing attitudes and beliefs.

- **‘Transitional’ narrative.** This narrative related to those young people who went through shifts and fluctuations in their drinking over time, eventually leading to reduced consumption. It was often difficult to pinpoint a specific experience or belief about alcohol that explained why a young person’s drinking changed, or exactly when change occurred. For many, however, their own personal experiences of drinking had helped to shape their decisions. Variations may continue to be evident in their drinking and they may still occasionally get drunk or have more to drink than they had planned.
- **‘Turning point’ narrative.** In this narrative, during a young person’s life a turning point led to a change in behaviour and/or a change in attitude towards alcohol. This was frequently observed in young people who were former heavy drinkers, or had a particularly negative experience with alcohol that put them off drinking. It was also noticeable, however, that two young people who had always been non-drinkers had made this deliberate decision to not drink at a young age. Turning points commonly involved religion, health or a drunken experience.

Much overlap is evident in the three narratives that were identifiable in young people’s accounts and the following paragraphs highlight the broader social and cultural context in which the young people made their decisions and managed being a non-drinker or drinking lightly.

For the young people in the study, choosing not to drink or to drink lightly was a positive choice that they made for varied reasons. The strongest messages and influences came from real-life observations. They included good parental models but for some they involved seeing the often negative or harmful effects of alcohol on others including friends and family; not liking the taste of alcohol; the high cost of alcohol; drinking not fitting in with their other commitments (e.g. sporting, academic); and their own negative past experiences with drinking, for example after getting drunk.

The family was felt by most young people to be important for setting boundaries around appropriate drinking behaviours. In many cases their first experiences of alcohol were supervised and often actively encouraged by parents, despite some young people persistently objecting to its taste. For most young people, parents provided good role models of sensible drinking, however some experienced the negative consequences of parents or other close relatives drinking through disruptions to their family life and family relationships. Other young people learned about alcohol’s potentially negative effects from witnessing their neighbours and community members with alcohol problems suffering from personal harm and damaged social reputations.

Seeing friends and peers drink to excess, which the majority of young people experienced at some point, served to reinforce the decisions of many non- and light drinkers to stop drinking heavily or quit completely. Many former drinkers had been through a period of drinking heavily with friends and had negative experiences that influenced their decision to stop drinking, such as making poor judgements or acting irrationally.

While some participants actively avoided drinking environments (i.e. pubs, house parties), others were content to spend time in such environments, although they often placed limits (e.g. arriving late or leaving early). Young people developed their own responses and strategies for managing not drinking within drinking situations. These included a firm but polite ‘no thank you’ to offers of drinks, ‘mirroring’ drinks so that people thought they were drinking alcohol, disposing of unwanted drinks and having a ‘legitimate excuse’ such as driving. The approach taken depended on the context (e.g. whether

with old friends, in a new social situation etc.) and also reflected the extent to which young people were 'open' about their drinking behaviour, which varied considerably.

Young people who knew family members or friends and neighbours with alcohol problems, or who had experienced the effects of drunkenness among their friends and in their communities, were most likely to consider the long-term effects of excessive alcohol use on their health; nevertheless, it was the immediate impacts such as not having a hangover or not being able to work or study effectively that concerned them most, not the longer-term health effects. It is unlikely therefore that health messages targeting young people will be effective, although for some they may help to reinforce existing attitudes and behaviours.

While for some young people choosing not to drink or drink lightly was central to their identity, for others it was 'no big deal'; rather, it was just one among many choices they made about their lives. Furthermore, some participants placed great value on being different and not following the 'crowd', while for others this was not a consideration. Many actively pursued interests and hobbies that did not involve being part of drinking cultures or where alcohol was a focus; indeed, heavy drinking would often impede their activities e.g. taking part in competitive sport. A strong emphasis was often placed on responsibilities connected to work, study or sometimes acting as a good role model or assuming a caring role within the family.

Young people challenged and were critical of what they saw as distorted and negative portrayals of young people as heavy 'binge' drinkers in the media. There is a need to redress the current imbalance in these media portrayals and to widen the drinking discourse beyond misuse and drunkenness and its effects. Drinking and getting drunk is not an automatic 'rite of passage' for young people. In Great Britain in 2010 almost a third of young men aged 16–24 were non-drinkers or drank less than one unit a week, while a third of young women drank nothing or less than one unit a week (NHS Information Centre for Health and Social Care, 2012). Data from the 2010 General Lifestyle Survey indicates that 52 per cent of men aged 16–24 had not drunk alcohol in the previous week, a rise on 44 per cent found in 2009 data and that 54 per cent of women aged 16–24 had not drunk in the previous week, a rise on 49 per cent found in 2009 data. This data suggests that it is commonplace for young adults to choose not to drink alcohol or to drink very little.

Within schools, young people in the study found that alcohol education, when it occurred, reinforced prevailing social and cultural norms that young people will drink and get drunk. The focus is on safer drinking and managing peer pressure to drink heavily with little or no consideration given to not drinking as an alternative and positive choice. Schools and higher education establishments need to find ways of addressing and challenging the prevailing social and cultural norms where young people are positioned as synonymous with a binge-drinking culture. Education needs to examine assumptions that all young people will drink and find effective ways of supporting those who choose not to, with less emphasis placed on longer-term health implications, which many young people find irrelevant.

In terms of their social lives, young people in the study often encouraged their drinking friends to participate in activities that did not involve alcohol or where alcohol was *incidental* rather than *integral* to the event, e.g. seeing a film, going bowling or visiting an exhibition. They felt that it was too easy for drinkers to 'default' to an evening of drinking and not to consider alternatives. University students highlighted the strong emphasis on activities involving drinking and getting drunk, with scant attention paid to organising events or socials that did not have alcohol at their core. While participants believed that

college and university social events revolved too much around alcohol, they gave many examples of successful, well-attended alcohol-free events (e.g. tea parties, drama student shows) or where the focus was not on alcohol (e.g. quiz nights) and felt that more effort should go into putting on and promoting such events.

When considering their drinking in the future, emulating more 'continental' styles of drinking was very widely recognised, and may be adopted by some of these young people as a popular way of drinking socially and sensibly at the same time, where the emphasis is not on drinking and getting drunk.

Messages for policy, practice and research

It is commonplace for young people to choose not to drink or drink lightly. For young people it is a positive choice that they make for varied reasons. One of the guiding principles of World Health Organization's *Global strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol* (WHO, 2010) is that children, teenagers and adults who choose not to drink alcohol have the right to be supported in their non-drinking behaviour and protected from pressures to drink. At all levels of policy-making and across all areas of practice (health, education etc.), policy-makers and practitioners need to challenge the assumption that drinking alcohol is part of growing up for all young people, emphasise that 'not drinking' is a valid option that many young people already choose and support those young people who opt not to drink, drink lightly and those who would like to drink less.

Choosing not to drink therefore needs to be positioned as one of the many choices that young people make about their lifestyles; it is currently marginalised and should be supported by policy-makers, practitioners and parents to assume a more mainstream role in young people's choices. There is currently a widespread assumption that drinking alcohol is an integral part of growing up for young people, reinforced by alcohol education messages given in schools and by health educators, by media portrayals and by some parents. The option of 'not drinking' needs to be presented within alcohol education targeted at young people and population-wide strategies need to be developed to help shift social and cultural attitudes and perceptions more generally.

Alcohol education and advice aimed at young people and at their parents should highlight the 'normality' of drinking lightly or choosing not to drink at all and include information on strategies used successfully by young people who do not drink or drink lightly themselves.

There should be more opportunities for young people to socialise without alcohol or where it is not the focus of the event. Further and higher education institutions can play a role in providing such opportunities and also ensuring that bars stock a wide array of soft drinks that are attractively priced and actively promoted. Such steps would help to support individuals who choose not to drink and foster a culture where heavy drinking is not seen as essential to a 'good night out'. However, for such changes to be effective they would need to be replicated more widely and be part of a broader cultural shift.

Research, by focusing on 'binge' drinking by young people and its associated harms, may have acted to reinforce the assumption that all young people drink in a potentially problematic way. Those who commission and conduct research have a part to play in redressing the balance by exploring and understanding all aspects of consumption, including the consumption patterns of those who do not drink or choose to drink within recommended limits.

NOTES

- 1 There is no consensus definition of 'binge drinking'. It is a term that has been used in a variety of ways, often quite loosely, particularly in the media, and the usefulness of the term has been called into question (Herring *et al.*, 2008; Szmigin *et al.*, 2008). In the major UK surveys (i.e. the General Household Survey), binge drinking is defined as drinking over six units for women and over eight units for men in one sitting.
- 2 Some religions (e.g. the Seventh-Day Adventist Church and Islam) forbid, discourage or restrict the consumption of alcohol and so as part of their faith followers abstain from alcohol.
- 3 BTEC – Business and Technology Education Council.

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